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CAMERON WHIRLED THE NOOSE ROUND AND ROUND HIS HEAD, THEN LAUNCHED IT FORTH.

CHAPTER I.

A WARNING.

"Two bits? Waal, I should smile!"

And Con Barry, the driver of the "bang-up-est hearse that straddles the back-bone of the American continent, sir!" flicked a fly off the ear of the nigh leader, rolled his "cud" into his off cheek, "so's not to carry his load too much on the outside goin' round this hyar bend," and took a squint out of his "weather eye" at the man who sat beside him, wrapped to the chin in a heavy cloak.

"A high-toned Greaser!" had been his mental comment; and he had disliked his passenger with the universal prejudice of the West against any one of Mexican blood, until the latter had won him over in spite of himself by the irresistible charm of polite manners.

"The place has an exceptional record for even this wild country, I have heard," observed

Senor Fabriano quietly, with the purpose of leading him on.

"You'd make up yer mind to that jest to look at it. The one street it's built on was laid out, they do say, by a cock-eyed surveyor: when he was half shot; an' he made large allowances fur sich times as he should be clean flummuxed. It makes a sober man dizzy to walk the length of it; but when ye're blind—when ye're paralyzed—when yer foot is on yer native heath, an' yer name is O'Tool!—then, sir, ye kin tack about in that thar street, an' jest be surprised to see how every kink an' corner has been calculated, so's't yer natural swing will dove-tail in."

"And the people are as remarkable as their town."

"They ain't no ways slow, stranger! Ye hyear me?"

"The marshal seems to be the right man in the right place."

"Waal, now, ain't he?"

"It is he, I am told, who, in the speech with which he accepted his election, declared that as long as he held the office he was determined to have a quiet camp or a quiet graveyard."

"That's Jake, every time!"

"But is he not in constant danger of being assassinated by the men he wars against?"

"Ef they are smarter than he is! When he's awake, he calculates to keep his eye skinned; an' he sleeps in a reg'lar fort."

"A fort?"

"A shanty built o' planks too thick to be bored by a pistol-ball. Whar'd he be ef they could plug him jest when they wanted to?"

"He must be a man of nerve."

"Nervy? Jake? Waal, he's about as tough as they make 'em! The boys don't stand him off none, you bet!"

The Spaniard made no direct reply to this, and the stage-driver went on:

"He's workin' up a case jest now that has stumped all his predecessors in office."

"Some mysterious murder?"

"Oh, no! Nobody never troubles themselves about nothin' o' that kind."

"What then is of sufficient interest to engage the special attention of your marshal?"

"Thar's a fly gent in these hyar parts that goes by the name o' Don Carlos. He levies toll on coaches, an' paints a camp fire-red once in a while, when he wants a leetle fun an' amusement. The boys don't mind a reasonable amount o' this sort o' thing. It takes the place o' passin' 'round the sasser at meetin'. But when he comes to stealin' hosses an' knockin' humans in the head, why, you've got to draw the line somewhars."

"I should think that about time!" smiled the Spaniard.

"Waal, he jest laughed at the small-pertaters o' marshals that has tried to buck ag'in' him so fur; so it's a matter o' pride with Jake to make him come down."

"I should be glad to have you put me in the way of seeing this marshal as soon as we reach the camp."

Con turned his head sharply.

"Got somethin' in his line?"

"A little private business."

"Oh! Exactly! It's none o' my business, to be sure. I'll—"

"I did not mean that you should take my words in that offensive way."

"Oh, it's all right, boss. I ain't inquisitive. It'll do me proud to put you on to Probst."

"I am obliged to you."

"Don't mention it, ef you please!"

But at this moment came an unexpected interruption.

A horseman appeared in the road on ahead, drawn to the side so as to leave the way unobstructed, yet holding something up in his hand.

"What is that?" asked the Spaniard.

"You git me," answered Con.

"He seems to wish the coach to stop."

"That thar ain't an uncommon wish in this hyar section."

"You don't mean to say—"

"I do mean to say that it may be a new dodge, jest as like as not. They're always up to somethin'."

"They?"

"The gents o' the road."

"But this man seems to be holding out something to give you; and there is no display of arms."

"All the same, he may expect to git a thundarin' sight more than he gives."

"Shall you stop, and see what he wants?"

"Waal, that's jest as you say. I allow thar won't be nothin' lost by pullin' up. Ye see, ef

he wants us he'll find a way to fetch us to his way o' thinkin', anyhow."

"Then I vote that we stop."

"You'll observe one thing."

"What's that?"

"That he has a right smart chance o' hair on his mug."

"There's nothing strange in that."

"Waal, no; but it makes a mighty clever disguise, ef a man has a notion that way."

"Nevertheless, let us see what he wants."

"Hallo, pardner!—what's the row?" asked Con.

The stranger made no reply in words; but as the stage drew up he held out what in the gathering gloom appeared to be a piece of white paper.

Con took it from his hand; and before any one could interpose further, his horse leaped forward as if he had felt the spur.

Headed in the direction from which the coach had come, he was rapidly disappearing, when the Spaniard cried:

"Halt! We want to know something more of you!"

The man looked over his shoulder, but did not draw rein.

"Halt!" cried the Spaniard again, leveling a revolver menacingly at him.

The man bent forward until he rested on his horse's neck, and plied the spur vigorously.

"His behavior is certainly strange," said Senor Fabriano, refraining from firing, and returning his weapon to its place of concealment. "Let us see what is in his missive; for it seems to be a communication of some sort."

"You're welcome to what you kin make of it," said Con, whose curiosity was modified by the consciousness that the "gents of the road" show stage-drivers every consideration.

"It don't stan' 'em in hand to kill the goose that lays the golden egg"—i. e., to frighten off the men who fetch them their booty.

Senor Fabriano took the scrap of paper, and held it before the coach lamp.

On it was traced in scraggly characters:

"Look out for Don Carlos. He's layin' fur you in the last holler after you make the grade."

"A FRIEND IN NEED."

"Well?" asked the Spaniard, when he had read this aloud.

Con laughed.

"You can't make nothin' out o' them chaps," he declared. "Jest as like as not, he's on the fust raise this side o' the grade."

"Shall you go on?"

"You bet I'm goin' on! This hyar stage runs on time, ur bu'ss her swingletrees!"

"But the inside passengers ought to be warn-ed."

"You kin do that ef you're a mind to."

"If you please!"

The Spaniard leaned over to rap on the coach door; but at this moment a head was thrust out, and a voice asked:

"What's all this hyar funny business? Who was that thar galoot, an' what did he want?"

Senor Fabriano handed down the missive.

"Here is a warning that he was kind enough to leave us. What is to be done about it?"

The note was perused, calling forth various comments.

A woman's voice expressed her terror, and urged that the coach be at once turned about.

A man—the one who had thrust forth his head—swore roundly that all the road-agents in Oregon couldn't make him "turn tail."

One tremulously asked for information respecting the famous outlaw.

Another expressed the opinion that the evil was the result of cowardice on the part of travelers.

"How can one or two men demoralize a whole coachful, when they are as well armed as their assailants?" he asked. "A little manly resistance would put this thing down. I move that we go on, and try to give as good as we get."

"But it is to be remembered that this fellow has half a dozen at his back."

"And that there are a half-dozen of us."

The matter being put to a vote, the timid ones were shamed into silence, and the coach went on.

Although they held their weapons in readiness for a surprise, nothing happened until they came to the hollow where they had been warned to expect the road-agent.

There they heard the well-known challenge:

"Halt! Throw up your hands!"

CHAPTER II.

PLOTTING IN THE DARK.

"Hist! We'll be spotted!"

"In this devil's-delight of a night? You must

think that these Americanos have eyes like cats, to see in the dark."

"But your eternal coin-music can be heard as far in the dark as—"

"If you yourself were not so fond of your own eloquence, my Rubio, you would hear that some one is coming."

Silence fell between the speakers, and a man could be heard plodding with an unsteady step through the darkness.

As he passed, the man whose voice had betrayed his Spanish extraction thrust out his foot.

The pedestrian stumbled over it, very nearly falling to the ground.

He growled out a wrathful oath, and reeled on, unsuspecting that the obstacle had been put in his path by design.

"That stoughtonbottle came near falling over you, didn't he?" asked the man who had been addressed as Rubio.

"I tripped him purposely," was the cool reply.

"The deuce you did! What was that for?"

"I wanted to hear his voice."

"You have a queer taste, if you take such risks to hear such music."

"I suppose if you had wanted to know who he was, you would have hailed him, and demanded his name and lineage!"

"H'm! Waal, that's one way of gittin' at it. I suppose you found out?"

"I learned that he wasn't the man we are after. That is all I wanted to know."

Rube Martin saw the point, and did not think it profitable to follow the discussion any further.

"They're cuttin' up high Dutch in that ranch," he observed, after they had listened for a moment to the sounds of revelry proceeding from a neighboring dance-house. "I reckon your young light-beels will furgit that we're waitin' out hyar in the mud. Suppose we sneak up a leetle higher, an' see ef we can't git the wink to him."

"Be wary! It may put the dogs on the scent if I am seen about here."

They crept cautiously forward, vigilant of eye and ear, until they could peer into a window of the dance-house.

The reflected light faintly illuminated their countenances, and discovered as sinister a pair of physiognomies as one need wish to run across in a dark night.

One was the swarthy face, delicate in feature, of a Spanish-Mexican. It bespoke for its owner unmitigated selfishness and cruelty. Its expression was a ferocious eagerness which suggested the idea of a human beast of prey.

The other was a low-grade face of indeterminate nationality, such as appears in this country of mixed peoples.

"Thar he is!" cried its owner, pointing through the window.

"Where?—where?" asked Senor Valanquez, eagerly following the direction of his companion's finger.

"In the very middle of the room, cuttin' a pigeon's-wing with the gal herself. My eye! but she's a hummer! Jest look at that, ef you please!"

The Spaniard saw a couple of dancers who had attracted to themselves the admiration of the whole room. They were both dressed in Mexican costume, the lady's short skirts and tight bodice showing off her slight yet exquisitely rounded figure to charming advantage.

Although her complexion was olive, the rich blood mantling through it gave her a flower-like beauty. There was not a trace of tropical languor about her. She was the embodiment of vivacity. Her eyes sparkled, her teeth gleamed, her whole face seemed to speak the enjoyment of the moment.

When discovered, she was pirouetting with an airy grace, trailing a gay scarf through the air so that it formed a spiral about her rapidly-whirling body.

Her partner was one of her own nationality, his close-fitting dress displaying a finely-developed physique. But there was that in his face which made the beholder hope that the girl stood in no intimate relation to him.

"Andres?—yes," muttered Senor Valanquez.

"But where is Rafaelle?"

"Over yonder in the corner, playin' into our hands as nicely as if he was standin' in with us! Ha! ha! he looks like a bear suckin' a sore paw."

"He'd better make the most of his opportunity. It's the last time he'll have a chance to show his jealousy of the little coquette!" snarled Senor Valanquez, with a wolfish curl of his lip.

The man referred to was heavier in build than Andres, with a sullen, hang-dog countenance that ought to have made him repulsive to any woman.

He was watching the dancers with a glare of dull ferocity in his eyes. So undisguised was his jealousy that it had made him the butt of several wits in the company, to the merriment of others who were afraid to chaff him themselves.

"I tell you, my dear," said one of the gossips, "harm will come to Andres's recklessness. Rafaelle Milado is not the sort of a man that it is safe to trifle with."

"Did you ever see such an outrageous flirt?" was the reply. "Will it not be Lola's fault if they come to blood over her? I believe that she wishes to gratify her vanity with the sensation of a murder on her account."

"How charitable you are, little one!" cried a gallant who had overheard the last words. "But then Senorita Lola is so charming that she must expect no mercy from any of her own sex, who hold beauty—rival beauty—the unpardonable sin!"

And tapping the lady on the shoulder with the fringe of his scarf, he ran off, laughing at her flush of anger.

All this was preparing the way for events that followed.

The dance ended. Andres suddenly thought him that he was awaited without, and took his leave with a hurried word to his partner, who smiled upon him sweetly.

She was joined by the black-browed Milado, who said:

"Come, sweetheart! it is high time that I had some little of your attention."

"You might have more of it if you were more agreeable!" was the spirited retort.

"I am tired of dancing attendance on your whims," retorted the fellow. "Besides, I can gain my end without playing the fool at your capricious apron-string."

"Your end?" returned the girl, scornfully. "You can gain no end with me by playing either the fool or the brute, which is more in keeping with your nature!"

"Well, the time is at hand when you shall know that I have not brought you up for the amusement of every spindleshanks that chances this way!"

"And for what have you brought me up, pray?"

"For myself, my dear!"

The girl uttered a fierce ejaculation of scorn.

"Do you think me still a child, that you can make me believe that I am your slave because so far I have kept you in money for drink? Rafaelle Milado, I may as well tell you, once for all, that I have taken from you the last abuse I intend to! From childhood up I have always disliked you as much as I feared you. Now I still dislike you, without any longer fearing you. If you do not wish me to hate you, and shake off the yoke of your tyranny, I advise you to drop the tone you have assumed toward me of late. I am no longer a child, as you have said; but it does not follow that I must look upon you as my future master. A fine honor it would be to call you husband!"

And she laughed scornfully.

In her anger she had raised her voice until all those in her vicinity heard her rejection of the man who had been to her thus far a sort of guardian, until her budding womanhood led him to aspire to the rights of a husband.

"Heyday!" cried the gossip before mentioned. "Here's a fine rebellion! These chits of things are women before they are out of pantalets! It was not so in my day, when children were taught modesty."

"How long ago that must have been, for the senora to have so completely forgotten her early instruction!" laughed the gallant who had before punished her ill-natured remark.

A general laugh followed this sally.

The lady at whose expense it was, crimsoned through her paint with rage.

Milado turned a dull purple, at his share of the public scorn.

"Hark you!" he muttered in Lola's ear, "if I see any more of your coquetry, I will teach you who is master here!"

"Look out that you don't get the worst of the bargain!" sent back the girl, with a fine flash in her eyes.

They were words that would be remembered against her presently by her enemies—envious women.

Meanwhile Andres had gone out and joined his patron, Senor Valanquez.

"Well, you seem to be enjoying yourself!" said that worthy gentleman, sulkily.

"Por Dios!" laughed the giddy Spaniard,

"would heaven have vouchsafed women and music if we were not to be merry? True, the whisky with which these *Americanos* replace wine is vile stuff; but it puts life into the heels, for all that. And the breath of the divine Lola would take from the palate a far worse taste than it leaves!"

"When you're ready for business," interposed Rube Martin, in the cold tone with which a man "sits down" on another, "we'll talk business."

"What would you?" asked the Spaniard, with a shrug.

"Is everything in readiness?" asked Senor Valanquez.

"At the first signal, those who are to attend to the lights—what you call, Senor Rubio?—douse the glim?—they will get into position. At the second signal—hey, presto! we have a fine uproar. Then comes the cry:—'The lights! the lights!'—and we are in darkness. Now arises a cry—But, senors, it would be ungracious to anticipate the drama."

"Then everything is arranged to insure a complete success? We must have no bungling."

"Senor Valanquez, we lack but one thing."

"And what is that?"

"The universal lubricator!"

And showing his teeth in a radiant smile, Senor Andres Ystavian rubbed his hands significantly.

Senor Valanquez silently drew a plethoric purse from some receptacle in his clothes, and tendered it to Andres.

The latter threw up his hands, with a little cry of affected dismay.

"I!" he exclaimed. "Would I hang such a millstone about my neck? It goes to Carlos, as arranged. When he gives us the signal that all is concluded between you, the drama will begin. But there is no harm in balancing it in one's palm. My faith! it hath a goodly bulk! And gold—all gold, my excellent cousin!"

"Enough to keep the lot of you in aguardient for a six-month!" assured Martin, a little contemptuously.

"Where is Carlos?" asked Valanquez.

"Here, there, everywhere! Who can tell?" cried Andres, airily. "When you least expect him, he will appear at your elbow. But you need not trouble yourself to look for him. He has a most extraordinary scent for gold. But there is the divine redowa! Lola has promised me a few more moments in heaven! I would not lose a measure for all your dross! *Hasta!*"

And he was away with a gay troll.

Rube Martin muttered an oath.

"The Greaser dog! He goes to sell out that girl that loves him, an' that he's half in love with himself, as chipper as if—"

"Don't waste your indignation," interrupted Senor Valanquez, who overheard the latter part of his words. "She is not in love with him, nor he with her. It is only your cold-blooded northern indifference that makes the least sentiment seem to you a grand passion. Eh! *Caramba!*"

He started violently, as some one appeared at his elbow.

"I did not know that Senor Valanquez was so profound a moralizer!" said a deep voice out of the darkness.

"Carlos!" exclaimed the startled Spaniard.

"At your service, senor!"

And the speaker stood, hat in hand, bowing low in mock deference.

"I suppose there is not much more to be said?" observed Valanquez.

"Your servant prefers action," was the significant rejoinder.

"How is this to your taste?"

And he passed over the purse he had before tendered Andres.

"Senor, it is the silent eloquence to which there is no reply!"

"You are at liberty to count it, if you are not satisfied with the weight."

"It shall be counted to-morrow."

"After your work is done? I thought that Don Carlos was more cautious than that."

"Don Carlos has a way of settling fraudulent accounts that leaves few willing to become his debtors by indirection."

"An oily devil!" muttered Rube. "That was an ugly hint!"

Senor Valanquez made no reply.

There was room for none; for as silently as he had made his appearance, Don Carlos vanished, as if into thin air.

Neither of his interlocutors had seen his face. He had come like a shadow, and gone like a shadow. The dimly perceived outlines of a cloak and a slouch hat had effectually concealed his figure.

But Rube Martin had received a strange impression.

"Blow me if I don't believe that Don Carlos and Senor Andres are so closely related that one takes off his boots when the other goes to bed! His voice was certainly disguised. But he's a lightning-change artist if it is him."

While this was passing in his thoughts his companion caught him by the arm.

"Now for your part! She will believe you, being an American."

"That is very well said, my friend! Bein' an American! Well, bein' an American, it strikes me that thar's a lot of us, all pitchin' on to one little girl, an' a beauty at that!"

"Hal! you do not repent? You will not betray us?"

The Spaniard was in a fever of excitement in the instant.

"What do you take me for?" demanded Martin, with a fine air.

"Pardon!" exclaimed the other, seeing his mistake. "It was but the anxiety of the great stake."

"Waal, take my advice, an' keep cool in the future."

"Hark! It is precipitated!"

And from the dance-house proceeded cries of excitement.

A moment later the lights went out, and then all was the wildest confusion.

CHAPTER III.

DON CARLOS.

In the middle of the road appeared a man on horseback, with a leveled revolver.

"Keep on!" whispered the Spaniard in the ear of the driver.

"And git bored?" objected Con. "Excuse me, ef you please. Do you observe, my Christian friend, that that thar weepion is p'inted at me, individually and collectively?"

And he drew up his horses as commanded.

"This hyar ain't none o' my funeral, ye understand," he pursued. "You fights it out amongst yerselves. I'm paid fur drivin', I am!"

"Very well, then!" returned Senor Fabiano; "here is the opening shot!"

And quickly drawing his revolver, he fired at the road-agent.

The latter fired a return shot just as his horse reared in the air.

"Air ye hit?" asked Con of the man at his side.

The Spaniard did not reply, but catching the whip out of the driver's hand, lashed his horses into a run.

Heads were thrust out of the coach on either side, and an indiscriminate warfare ensued, the outlaws appearing from the undergrowth flanking the road.

Oaths and yells blended with the reports of firearms; and the tramping of the horses mingled with the rumble of the coach.

In that running fight the actors could not be very clearly distinguished; but those within the coach considered all without it their enemies.

But a strange thing was observed. The road-agents seemed to get into a fight among themselves. They soon outstripped the coach, and went on down the road at a furious pace, yelling and firing at each other as they went.

"How do you account for that?" asked the Spaniard.

"I ain't accountin' fur nothin'!" responded Con, a little sulkily. "Ef you want to git drivers that's accountin' fur every queer thing that happens on the road, you'll have to guarantee 'em a dog-gone sight more'n we git out o' the transportation company!"

"It may be that they have had a falling-out among themselves. That would be a reason why one party should warn us against the rest."

"Have it your own way," assented Con. "Ef that suits you, I'm sure it suits me."

"There was one thing that I noticed," continued the Spaniard. "The leader of the ruffians was a very young man—a mere lad, I should say."

"I don't see how you come at that," observed one of the inside passengers. "He wore a mask. I made it out clearly by the flash of his revolver."

"True," admitted the Spaniard; "but my guide was his voice. I think I shall recognize it if I hear it again. At first he disguised his voice as well as his face; but in the heat of action, he allowed himself to be thrown off his guard. It was then that his true tones came out."

"Do you mean the young fellow with his hat cocked up in front?" asked one of the passengers.

"Certainly. The person who challenged us."

"An' afterward was nearly knocked off his horse by that strappin' feller with the lojun yell?"

"Exactly."

"Why, I've clapped my peepers on him before."

"Indeed? Who is he?"

"He swings the handle of Little Oh-my."

"You Americans have odd nick-names for one another," said the Spaniard. "But what can this mean?"

"Why, he's little, but—oh, my! See?"

And the elucidator laughed.

"You will allow," he went on, "that he has a brash way with him that's calculated to make the average man take a back seat."

"This is a strange country," observed the Spaniard, a little dryly, "where the boys terrorize the men!"

"Waal, it ain't every boy as kin do it, ye understand," said his informant. "But thar's boys an' boys. Some boys is a dog-gone sight smarter'n some men. That you will allow."

"And do you stop your coaches whenever one of these smart boys—"

"Hold on right thar!" interposed Con Barry, feeling that he was called upon to defend his conduct. "You may think it a low-down thing to pull up an' hand yer pilgrims over to road-agents. That shows how inconsiderate most folks is. You goes over this hyar road onc't; but I goes through every day. Ef I takes one party through on the keen jump, what's to prevent the agents from layin' fur me an' lettin' daylight through me. so's't the company will put on a more accommodatin' driver in my place! My hide won't stop a pistol-ball sooner than one o' yours; an' I ain't takin' no sure death, ye understand, fur the filthy stipend I gits out o' the transportation company! When you travels in the West, we checks you through, but you goes at your own risk!"

"That seems very reasonable from that point of view," smiled the Spaniard.

"Don't it, now?" asked Con, earnestly.

The stage kept on without any further interruption until it reached Two Bits.

It was received with eager curiosity.

"Have you been called by the agents?" was the demand.

"You bet!" responded Con Barry.

"An' got cleaned out ag'in?"

"Not much!"

"What prevented?"

"Sand!"

"Not your sand, I'll go bail!"

"Johnny, wait until you've got sand enough to drive a coach at all, before you do any amount o' shoutin'!"

"Then you really stood 'em off among you?"

"I allow that this hyar gent done the most toward it. An' what's more, he spotted their leader."

All looked at the Spaniard with interest, modified by prejudice.

Could a "Greaser" be "any good?"

The Spaniard turned away, as if annoyed at being thus brought to notice in the role of a hero.

"Their leader?" repeated a curious one.

"An' who do you think it was?"

"Give us an easy one!"

"You'd never git it through your thick top-knots; so I'll give ye the cue. It was Little Oh-my."

"Go 'way!"

"It was, ur you may shoot me!"

"That boy!"

"He's man enough fur you! I'll put my money on that!"

"Why, hyar he is now."

All turned, to see a youth mounted on a powerful horse dash up with as much confidence as if he had nothing to apprehend.

"He's got the cheek of the old 'un!" muttered one of the bystanders, "ef you're sure it's him."

"Waal, it ain't nobody else!"

"Hallow, youngster!" cried one of the men.

"We've been gittin' a bad account of you."

"Is that so?" asked the youth, with a laugh, as he drew up in their midst.

"They tell us that you are the leader of the road-agents."

"Don Carlos? Ha! ha! Are you sure they didn't say that I was the follower of the road-agents? I don't know as I could very well deny that."

"Leader or follower, you'll find that it ain't such a good joke as you seem to take it."

"What do you mean?" cried Little Oh-my, seeing that the man spoke in earnest.

"I mean that you stand about as good a chance o' dancin' on nothin' as ary galoot I ever see in this hyar camp; I've been at the plantin' of every one that has a high lot up the slope."

"You are crazy! What are you trying to get through you?"

"What do you say, gents? You're the ones that spotted him."

And the speaker turned to the occupants of the coach.

"There can be no mistake," answered the Spaniard. "He is the person that challenged the coach and led the road-agents throughout."

Others corroborated this statement unhesitatingly.

The boy stared in open-mouthed astonishment. He saw the men approaching to take him in custody, with the wrathful frowns of judges who had already condemned.

"Hold on, gentlemen!" he cried. "This is a conspiracy! See! my accuser is a Greaser! He himself may be Don Carlos. It would be a clever trick to throw Marshal Probst off the scent by putting me up as a scapegoat."

"You shall have a fair trial, an' a chance to show all that, if you kin make any one believe it. But meanwhile the senor don't happen to be the only one that seen you at your tricks."

And the men began to close in about their intended captive.

He knew the value of "a fair trial" in that country. If, after he was hanged, the boys discovered that they had made a mistake, they would declare that it was "a dog-gone shame," and that would be the end of the matter. The next suspected man would be strung up out of hand the same way.

Knowing this, he had no disposition to submit himself to the arbitrament of an impartial jury of his fellow-countrymen.

"Stand back!" he cried, whipping out his revolver.

"Take him, boys! He's a slippery one!" was the cry.

And on all sides they sprung to seize his bridle-rein or his person.

As he gave his horse the spur, he reversed his weapon and knocked on the head a man who had seized his bridle-rein.

With a tremendous bound the horse clave his way through the crowd; then away on the wings of the wind went Little Oh-my!

"Shoot him! Kill the villain!" went up the shout.

But amid a rattle of fire-arms the bold youth escaped.

Then the cry was:

"Probst! Whar's the marshal?"

CHAPTER IV.

THE MARSHAL OF TWO BITS.

At one end of Two Bits, far enough away from the other houses to leave an open space all about it of a hundred yards or so, stood Marshal Probst's "fort."

As Con Barry had described it, it was built of planks too thick to be penetrated by a pistol-ball. That there might be no break in any of its four walls, it was without windows, the light being admitted through a skylight in the roof.

Its one door was a solid oaken barrier which would bid defiance to any ordinary assault.

Two Bits was noted for its utter lawlessness. Thus far its marshals had all "died with their boots on." They were "planted" in a row on the hillside, with head-boards which bore the date of their election to office and their "passing out."

These dates were in no case twelve months apart.

It was therefore with a full knowledge of the dangers he braved that Jake Probst had consented to assume the fatal honor.

He had begun by declaring that he would have a quiet camp or a quiet graveyard; and to make the execution of his threat the more impressive, he had started a private graveyard, where he "planted" the breakers of the peace who came to their death by his means.

When a new man came into the camp, he was duly escorted to this spot, and the row of mounds were a silent setting-forth of the majesty of the law to which words could add nothing.

In his "fort" sat the marshal who for six months had held his own against all comers. He was full six feet in stature, with broad shoulders and deep chest, and stern-set features, which gave him a formidable appearance.

With his feet on the table, he sat in a home-made chair constructed of hickory saplings. He was smoking a stumpy clay pipe, and frowning meditatively.

"Moight I be so bowld," ventured an Irishman at his elbow—one Micky McClosky, who always thought of himself as "the mairshal's depity," though the boys were so irreverent as to call him "Probst's coyote."

"Waal, spit 'er out," said the marshal, without looking round.

"Whin will we be afther tacklin' that divil, Dan Cairlos, I duano?"

"That's none of your infernal business," replied the marshal, in a tone which was entirely free from annoyance.

"No offence, yer honor!"

Probst stretched himself and yawned.

Suddenly his manner underwent a complete change. He turned his eyes toward the door, and so sat on the alert.

"Somebody is coming this way," he said.

"Yer honor has shairp ears," said Micky, not however going to the length of admitting that he had heard nothing as yet.

But a moment later approaching footsteps became apparent to even him.

"It's a thafe o' the world!" he whispered, observing that they were stealthy.

"Dry up!—will you?" was the marshal's terse command.

The steps ceased at the door. Then, after a silence in which the breathing of some one was faintly audible to the acute hearing of the marshal, three measured knocks were told off on the door as if with a pistol-butt.

This bold summons was so out of keeping with what had gone before that the Irishman started with alarm, and drew his revolver, muttering:

"Howly Mither!"

"Who's hyar?" demanded Probst, without changing his position.

There was no verbal reply; but a scraping sound drew his eye to the crevice beneath the door.

There he saw a scrap of coarse brown paper making its way into the room.

Jake Probst was not a man who liked mysteries. He saw that the applicant without did not mean to show his face, and that of itself was enough to make him resolve that he would see it at all hazards.

With a whiff he blew out the candle, sprung to the door, swung up the bar which secured it, and leaped out into the night.

He knew that he must first depend upon his ears; so the moment he was clear of the doorway, so that an enemy could not use that as a guide to pick him off, he crouched down, and remained perfectly still, peering about him on all sides.

But he was disappointed. He heard no retreating footsteps; he saw no flitting shadow. From the camp came the noises of its nightly carousal, but immediately about him all was as still as if wrapped in death.

Micky McClosky had remained in his place. He was too well trained to hazard the balking of his master's efforts by moving without orders.

It seemed to him an age before he heard a voice in the darkness, which he recognized as that of the marshal, saying guardedly:

"Light the candle, and look for that bit of paper."

Then all was profoundly still again. The voice had been at the door, but its owner moved away again so noiselessly that Micky could not hear him as he went.

Trembling with excitement, if not fear, he proceeded to carry out his master's orders, not assured indeed that his search would not be cut short by an unseen bullet.

But nothing followed upon his striking the light. Unmolested he looked within the house near the door, and then passed to the outside, and shading the flame with his hand, moved about until he found what he sought where the light wind had blown it.

He then re-entered the house, and blew out the candle, and thereafter waited in darkness.

A prolonged, death-like silence followed. Then the breathless Irishman heard the door close, and the welcome voice of his superior said:

"Come! Let's have a light!"

"God be praised!" muttered the Irishman, whose relief was not marred by the touch of impatience in the marshal's tones.

It was evident that Probst was chagrined by his failure to discover anything where his mysterious visitant had had so slight a start of him.

The candle being relighted, he took the paper from the table where Micky had laid it.

"What the deuce is this?" he muttered, as he knitted his brows over the deciphering of the characters traced on the paper.

They read:

"Don Carlos has an appointment at the Double-shuffle to-night. If you have the nerve and the savvy to take him, now is your chance."

"A FRIEND OF LAW AND ORDER."

The marshal crumpled the missive in his strong grip, and stood with his eyes fixed on vacancy, weighing the probabilities of a snare.

He had not openly declared war against Don Carlos, though his friends had swaggered about and offered extravagant bets that he was "lay-in" fur him, and would "fetch him to book yit!"

Was the outlaw taking the initiative, and daring him to a trial of wits?

"Phwat is it?" asked Micky McClosky.

His chief made no reply.

The Irishman scratched his head, and tried to take matters philosophically.

Then came another interruption—this time, the bold, decided steps of honest men.

"We've found him in his roost," said a voice.

"You kin see the light under the door."

"There are no windows, apparently," observed another.

Then came a decided knock and the sound of shuffling feet.

"Who's hyar?" asked the marshal, as before.

"Con Barry, and a gent to see the Marshal o' Two Bits," was the sonorous reply.

With a stride the marshal reached the door, and swung it wide.

He knew that Con would not be a party to any treachery.

"Come in," he invited.

"This hyar gent kin introduce himself, and tell his own business," said Con. "I don't pretend to know one or the other."

The marshal looked inquiringly at the stranger.

"What kin I do fur you, sir?" he asked; and went on, without break:

"I shall have to ask you to come to the point at once, as I have pressing business to attend to."

"I am sorry to find you preoccupied," said Senor Fabriano, as he paused on the threshold.

He thought his reception an ungracious one, and that the marshal's "business" was only a pretext.

At first he was inclined to resent this brusque reception; but then came the consideration of how much he had at stake, and how this man might, if he would, aid him in the accomplishment of his mission. He therefore tried to repress the flush of indignation that mantled his swarthy cheek, and went on:

"I have come many miles to frustrate a great wrong. But to do so it will be necessary to meet and overcome men as bold as they are unscrupulous. What you have accomplished among the lawless characters of this section has led me to believe that you are the man best able to help me to cope with this villainy. There is money to be—"

"Excuse me," interrupted the marshal. "I see that your business will require time. I will see you later. Just now I shall have to bid you good-evening."

He turned to McClosky and said:

"Put out the light, and follow me."

He then advanced to the door and stood holding it open.

Senor Fabriano and Con Barry passed him, the former with a deep flush on his cheek, the latter evincing a strong disposition to whistle sarcastically.

Micky McClosky put out the light as he was bid, and followed his chief, without a word.

Together they walked rapidly past their visitors toward the center of the camp.

"Waal," drawled Con, "did they put us out along with the candle?"

Senor Fabriano made no reply, but strode silently along, no doubt reflecting on the heathenish manners of the *Americanos*.

As Jake Probst approached the Double-shuffle, he was accosted by an excited man who cried:

"Jake, you're jest the man we're after!"

"I have no time to attend to you now," said the marshal, impatiently.

"The deuce you hain't!" cried the other, not at all abashed. "Waal, maybe you've got time to attend to Don Carlos!"

That at once arrested the marshal's attention.

"Don Carlos? What of him?"

"Ah! that means business, does it?" laughed

the other. "I thought it would fetch you. But if you've got somethin' else on hand—"

"Don't play the fool, Abel!" growled the marshal, who seldom relished a joke at his expense. "What have you got to say about Don Carlos?"

"We've dropped onto him!"

"Very likely!"

"Oh, we have! But unluckily he's give us the slip ag'in."

"Of course!"

"But not before we got his ear-marks."

The marshal pulled out his watch, after the manner of a man who means to intimate that he is bored.

Abe Markoff, who was a good-natured fellow, laughed.

"I'll be hanged if you ain't the sassiest galoot in this hyar section o' country," he said. "I'd see yoe to Kingdom Come before I'd give you the cue, ef you couldn't git it from the next man you met, without my help. But you might as well know that Don Carlos is the hop-o'-my-thumb that they call Little Oh-my!"

"How do you know?" asked the marshal, quietly.

In his varied experience he had learned that, as "there is nothing so uncertain as a dead-sure thing," so there is nothing so probable as that which on the face of it appears the most improbable. Therefore he was too shrewd to express the incredulity he felt where he might meet incontrovertible proof.

Markoff related what had occurred on the arrival of the coach.

"And where is this warning?" asked Probst, remembering the intelligence of a similar nature that he had received.

"I reckon Con Barry's got it."

"Con Barry!"

There was a spice of annoyance in the marshal's voice.

"Hyar he comes to speak fur himself," said Markoff.

"Who's this hyar takin' my name in vain?" asked Con, as he came up.

"What is it about a warning that you are said to have?" asked the marshal.

"Why, yes," said Con, fumbling in his pocket. "Maybe you'd like to see it."

"Why didn't you show it to me when I first saw you?"

"Waal, you see, you was so busy—"

"Hand it over!" growled the marshal.

"Jest remember that that thar is my whip hand, an' ef it's all the same to you, don't pull it off!" said Con, as Probst took the paper from him.

"Thar's some folks in this hyar camp that's gittin' too all-fired smart!" growled the marshal. "I shouldn't wonder ef one o' these days, after a new shuffle, we'd find some o' the jacks missin'!"

This figure of speech called for no interpreter. A dead silence ensued, while Probst walked off to compare the "warning" with what he had so mysteriously received.

The writing corresponded. It was apparent that there was a traitor in the camp of the outlaws.

It was also evident that he feared to let his identity be known, doubtless well aware that his life would not be worth the price of a glass of whisky if he was once "spotted."

"Thar's something in this," said the marshal to himself. "But the trick is to know my man when I see him. Confound the coward! Why didn't he at least give me some clew? I wonder whether it can be the boy, after all."

He sought the men who had been in the coach and put them through a rigid cross-examination—all but the Spaniard. After his brusque treatment of him it was not an easy thing to go to him for a favor.

In the midst of this the camp was thrown into sudden excitement by the sounds of strife coming from the Double-shuffle saloon.

"Murder! Murder!" rung out the startling cry.

"Who's down?"

"Mlado, the Greaser! He's had the heart cut out of him at last."

"It's a wonder that it wasn't done long ago."

"Who downed him?"

"His leetle woman! I always knowed that she had the devil in her."

"He worreted her into it—you may depend on that. Sarved him right. Flesh an' blood can't stan' everything."

With these and a hundred other cries in his ears, Jake Probst ran to the Double-shuffle, where the wildest confusion prevailed, shrouded by the darkness.

"A light!—a light!" he commanded.

And a light was struck, revealing a bloody corpse stretched on the floor.

But what had become of Lola? Nobody could tell.

CHAPTER V.

LOLA.

As an offset to its many abominations, Two Bits had one thing of beauty and purity.

The women knew that Lola Milado was not one of them, though she did not excite them to anger by refusing to mingle with them when occasion required.

The men, admiring her broadly, "kept their distance."

Not to mention black-browed Rafaelle, who was a dangerous man, the little Mexican beauty was known to carry a stiletto in her garter, after the fashion of her countrywomen, and was believed to have the spirit and skill to use it.

The gossips had it that the ill-assorted pair were cousins—that Rafaelle was madly in love with the child-woman to whom he held the position of guardian, but that she was restive under his jealous tyranny; and they openly predicted that some day he would goad her to an act of desperation.

The community was therefore prepared to accept that interpretation of a tragedy in which Rafaelle should be the victim.

As to all of her race, the dance was to Lola an infatuation. She regarded a gracefully executed pirouette as a work of art; and anything approaching awkwardness filled her with keen pain.

Now it happened that Rafaelle was heavy on his feet, which would forever prevent her from admiring him. On the other hand, Andres was as graceful in his way as she; and without caring for him as a man, she thought him a ravishing partner in the dance.

Out of this preference grew up a fierce jealousy, which boded bloodshed. But as Rafaelle glared and frowned and gnawed his mustache with deadly hatred, Andres held him in check with that smile of taunting nonchalance which daunts the boldest because it is unfathomable.

It will be remembered that Andres had parted with Senor Valarquez, after the arrangement of their plot, to rejoin Lola in a redowa.

Rafaelle was furious. The working of his features and his fierce mutterings attracted the attention of many who enjoyed his chagrin.

The dance was at its height. Lola had forgotten everything save the ravishing cadences of the music to which her nimble feet kept perfect time.

The changes of the dance brought her into the vicinity of Rafaelle, when Andres cast a significant glance toward a group at the other side of the room.

Instantly an uproar arose. Then came a cry:

"The lights! the lights! Put out the lights!"

And so promptly that there could be no doubt that the movement had been pre-arranged, the room was in total darkness.

"It is a conspiracy!" shouted some one. "Don Carlos is at the bottom of it!"

At that, cries of alarm arose in all parts of the room.

The frightened crowd rushed in every direction, falling over each other in their efforts to get out of the room.

In the midst of this dire confusion a woman's shrill voice rose from the spot where Lola Milado had been last seen, crying:

"Ah! monster, how dare you?"

A savage oath in Rafaelle's harsh tones followed.

"Fiends! you have given me my death!" said a voice which all who heard it recognized as his.

Then in the suppressed tones of terror came the words:

"Mother of God! I have done it!"

And something fell to the floor.

Those who heard it shuddered. It was such a sound as would be caused by the fall of a dagger.

Close upon it followed a groan, and the heavy body of a man went to the floor with a crash.

There was a general rush away from the spot where all believed a ghastly corpse lay on its back in the darkness.

When the lights went out Lola, who was pirouetting at the moment, essayed to seize her escort, that clinging to him she might receive the protection of his greater strength from the rush of the crowd. Moreover she had just then caught sight of Rafaelle's writhing features, and was seized with a sudden apprehension that he

might take that opportunity to do her a mischief, as he had often threatened.

What was her surprise and dismay to feel her stiletto snatched from her garter! Her instant fear was that it would be plunged into her breast.

Then she unconsciously played into the hands of the plotters by crying:

"Ah, monster, how dare you?"

It saved Andres the necessity of exercising his ventriloquial powers.

He had snatched the stiletto. His hand plunged it into Rafaelle's side.

Then the luckless Milado did his part to further the schemes of the conspirators.

"Fiends, you have given me my death!" he cried, and reeled backward.

But now, while Lola stood in amazement, she heard a voice which sounded exactly like her own, or so nearly that even she recognized the design, crying:

"Mother of God! I have done it!"

She heard her stiletto drop on the floor. She heard the groan and fall of her guardian. In a flash she realized the plot by which she had been ensnared, and the impossibility of proving her innocence before such a jury as would try her under the direction of the ruthless marshal.

The infamy of death at the hands of a mob flashed across her mind. She saw the dangling rope and the madmen hooting with derision.

In wild panic she thought only of escape.

At that instant she was seized by the wrist, and a voice which she recognized as Andres's whispered in her ear:

"Unhappy girl! how could you do so rash a deed? But follow me. It will not do to let them hang you. Come! you may be able to escape."

"Oh, Andres!" she sobbed hysterically, "I am innocent!—indeed I am innocent!"

"Will you waste time in idle words?" he answered, dragging her along. "Of course you were justified. No one could endure such brutality. But these *Americanos*, and more especially this heretic of a marshal, know no difference between a beautiful woman and the most hideous vagabond among them."

With her head in a whirl she was dragged through the crowd into the open air.

She heard the cry of murder and the accusation brought against her as the murderess.

Then came the demand for the marshal, and a moment later the sound of his voice.

"I am lost!—oh, I am lost!" she cried to her quailing heart.

But at that moment a gruff voice growled:

"To thunder with yer marshal! He don't put his dirty hands on that piece o' caliker, ye understand!"

The speaker brushed against her. It was Rube Martin. He was come to play his part.

Even as he spoke he seemed to notice and recognize her. He caught her by the arm opposite to Andres.

"Hallo hyar!" he muttered, with an oath. "Is this you, you leetle Tartar? But don't be afeard o' me. I'm yer solid friend, I am! Who's this hyar? Yer lovyer, eh? Waal, I'm a-standin' in with him; an' between us we'll run you out o' danger, ur plant ther dog-gone marshal."

"Who are you?" asked Andres, peering across Lola to distinguish their new friend in the darkness.

"Never you mind who I am," said Rube, bluffly. "We'll have more time to talk that over some other day. But I've got a hoss that kin jest knock the socks off'n ary thing that stands on four feet in this hyar section o' country. Ef you want to run this leetle gal out o' harm's way, jest come along with me."

Before she had time to think of remonstrance or opposition of any kind, Lola found herself whisked out of the crowd and lifted to the back of a horse that stood ready saddled and bridled.

The animal was then set in motion, at first slowly, but soon more rapidly.

She knew that they were leaving the camp, but in what direction she could not have told. She presently became aware that Andres was no longer with her; but when or why he had gone she knew not.

However the stranger seemed kindly disposed, and with a woman's subtle instinct she detected something in his voice that led her to trust him.

He held the bridle-rein and ran beside her horse.

"Look hyar, leetle one," he said. "I've pulled you out of a mighty dirty hole."

"But I have done nothing! Believe me, I did not slay Rafaelle!" she protested.

"The trick is to prove it," he said. "Everything is ag'in' you, you'll allow."

"Yes! yes!" she admitted, hopelessly. "Yet I am innocent!"

"Waal, my dear, without debatin' that, I've taken a notion to ye, I have; an' I propose to stick to ye through thick an' thin, marshal or no marshal! Now you jest trust to me, an' I'll pull ye through, ur lose a leg!"

"I will trust to you," she answered him. "I know by your voice that you are a good man."

"Don't you take too much stock in that!" he objected. "I allow to have done some as low-down jobs as most men. But in this business I'm yer solid friend, ye understand. You kin tie to Rube Martin fur all you're worth."

Suddenly he stopped and listened.

"They're after you, leetle one!" he said. "This kind o' time ain't goin' to do. That thar marshal is the devil when he gits his dander up. Look a-hyar! You've got a straight road before ye. Ye can't miss it. It leads to the Idaho border. Jest you manage to cross the Snake river, an' you're out o' his jurisdiction. Ef he puts a hand on ye when you're on Idaho soil, you'll have friends that'll stan' by ye. Never mind the hoss-flesh. Git!"

And striking the animal a stinging blow, he let go the bridle-rein.

The terrified girl found herself plunging through the darkness alone.

She knew enough not to try to direct the animal's steps, but only to urge him to his utmost speed.

She was mounted astride a man's saddle; but being a Mexican woman, she was used to this method, and experienced no particular inconvenience. However, she in time became aware that her saddle was slipping, and threatened to turn and throw her.

This must be remedied at all hazards; so she drew her horse to the side of the road, and stopping him, dismounted.

It chanced that this occurred near a cross-road; and while she was buckling the surcingle tighter some horsemen wheeled into the road.

It was too late to mount and escape them. She must trust to the darkness, while she prayed that the horses might not neigh.

She caught her own horse's muzzle in her hands, and waited breathlessly.

The riders passed her in conversation.

What was her surprise and relief to recognize Andres's voice.

She was on the point of betraying her presence to him, when she heard him say:

"I turned her over to the gentle Rubio, as per contract. That is all I have to do with the matter. It is his business to see that she falls duly into the hands of his murderous countryman, the marshal. Do you take me for a murderer of women—that is to say, directly, with my own hand?"

"The spirit, if not the letter of your contract, is that you were to assist in putting her out of the way," was the reply. "I do not trust these dogs of *Americanos*. You should have seen that the marshal was apprised of her flight and the direction she had taken."

The horsemen passed on; but their secret was out. Andres, then, was a party to the plot against her! He had imitated her voice, putting those fatal words seemingly into her mouth. Now she recalled that he had once amused her by an exhibition of his ventriloquial powers.

And the stranger—she remembered that he had called himself Rube Martin, and Andres had said Rubio—he too was against her!

How could she escape from this web of treachery?

One thing was certain. She must no longer follow the route Rube had given her. He would set the marshal on her trail.

Thrown upon her own resources, she returned to the cross-road out of which Andres and his companion had come; but since they had come from the camp she rode in the opposite direction.

For hours she hurried on, until the sun rose. Then, so weak and faint that it seemed if she did not rest for a time she should fall out of her saddle, she dismounted, and lay down on the ground, while her horse nibbled the grass.

Before she was aware of the danger, she fell into a doze, from which she was roused she knew not how long after by the tramping of horses' feet.

To spring to her feet, to mount, to dash away, was the work of a moment. But she was too late. She had been discovered, and looking back, she saw the ruthless marshal pressing hard in pursuit.

"Now, Holy Mother—you whose ever-blessed Son I have adored—succor me!" she cried aloud.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FAIR FUGITIVE.

"GOOD Heavens! Look yonder!"

"A runaway!"

"And a woman at that! The beast will drown her, if he don't break her neck when he strikes the bank."

"Something must be done to save her."

"With the Snake between us, and the Big Jump not a hundred rods below? Are you anxious to go over the falls?"

"But we can't stand and see her die before our eyes."

"I don't see what's to hinder."

"Gents, that ain't no runaway."

"The deuce it ain't! I'd like to know what you call it, then."

"Don't you see that she's a-whippin' of him on?"

"Blowed ef that thar ain't so!"

"An' see!—she's lookin' back."

"Injuns!"

"Ur white men, sonny."

"Ye're right, Ole '49. See yonder! Thar they come round the bend."

"Waal, ef we can't cross the Snake, we kin keep them devils off! I'll give 'em warnin' the fust shot; but after that the man that comes within range will git somethin' worse'n a cod-fish-ball through him!"

And the speaker unslung his Winchester rifle and threw it forward, while his eyes flashed with indignant determination.

"My fresh young friend," interposed the man who had been addressed as Ole '49, "have you any notion who it is that you're proposin' to plug?"

"No; and I don't care! What difference does it make who it is that is runnin' a woman into the river?"

"Waal, accordin' to my calcalation, it makes a heap o' difference."

The younger man stared at the older.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"The Marshal o' Two Bits."

"And do you mean to say—"

"That it don't make no difference to him ef 'his man' happens to be a woman once in a while. He's goin' in fur law an' order, he is."

"But a woman—"

"Kin put in a center shot as well as the best o' men, ef she only knows how."

"And do you think that this woman—"

"I don't think nothin' about it. Jake Probst ain't after her fur nothin'. You kin bet yer bottom dollar on that thar proposition."

George Cameron held his rifle in suspense, while he gazed with a frown of irresolution at the rapidly approaching chase.

Though her features could not be distinguished very clearly at that distance, he fancied that the woman must be young and beautiful; for an abundance of chestnut brown hair streamed out behind her, while it could be seen that her dress was of gay colors.

Not far behind her rode two men, the foremost of whom was of gigantic stature.

It was by his unusual size that Ole '49 had recognized him, and guessed all the rest by his knowledge of the wild life of that section of country, where an act of violence was almost as likely to have been done by a jealous woman as by an infuriated man.

The woman and her pursuers were on the Oregon, the men whose conversation we have recorded on the Idaho, side of Snake river.

Between them rolled the rapid tide to its leap over a jutting precipice, the roar of its tumbling waters sounding to their ears like a sullen warning to any rider who had the temerity to attempt to stem its flood.

While the little knot of prospectors stand waiting to see whether the woman would run her horse into the water rather than yield to capture, their attention was diverted to the rear by the clatter of hoofs and a ringing, youthful voice crying:

"What, men! will you stand quietly by and see a woman chased into the river? It is certain death! She will be drowned! Rescue! rescue!"

And like a meteor a youth who was scarcely more than a boy shot by them on a fine roan gelding.

"Little Oh-my!" ejaculated one of the prospectors at sight of him.

The others too followed the lad with admiring glances.

"Marshal ur no marshal," said one, "he's got the divil ag'in' 'um now!"

"Confound the boy! he's fool enough for anything!" growled Old '49.

But in spite of his pretended disapproval he looked affectionate indulgence after the youth, as he cried:

"Hold on byar, you young rattle-head! Drat the boy! the lot of 'em lose their heads over a petticoat!"

Meanwhile Little Oh-my, while he sped on toward the higher bank of the river at breakneck speed, waved the fugitive back with both hands, crying:

"Back! back! you cannot cross! It is certain death!"

Now the girl was near enough so that he could distinguish the agony of fear in her bloodless face.

She cried back something that he could not make out, and the significance of which he could only infer from her appealing gaze.

Instead of heeding his warning, she urged her horse the harder, looking back as if to see whether she could keep the lead of her pursuers until she reached the river-bank where the fatal plunge awaited her.

The Marshal of Two Bits stuck to his purpose with bull-dog pertinacity.

Drawing his revolver, he opened fire on the horse of the fugitive.

Crack! crack! crack!

A spasmodic leaped showed that the animal had been hit.

"That must be stopped!" shouted George Cameron, with an enraged oath. "Come on, men!"

And throwing his rifle forward with the purpose of shooting at the marshal's horse, and so paying him in his own coin, he dashed after Little Oh-my, followed by the whole party.

But the fugitive had reached the river-bank; and without stop or stay her horse leaped from the brink into the rushing flood.

A groan went up from her new-found friends.

"It's all-day with her!"

Even the marshal, seeing that he had probably goaded her to her death, drew rein.

"Hang the little fool!" he growled.

"It's dhrown she will instead o' hangin', I'm thinkin'," said his companion, coming up.

"She'll be the first one that has slipped through my fingers, if she does," replied the marshal.

"Whaur's the odds, av she pays the forfeit av her loife? Milado will rest in his grave as aisy, whether she dhrown or hang."

"But I was elected to hang; an' hang I will, every mother's son—or daughter, fur that matter—that breaks the law!"

"Ye'll not be afther following her into the wather, I dunno?"

"Do you take me for a fool?"

But the marshal ended with an oath of astonishment, while Micky McClosky cried:

"Just look at that now, will ye? The young devil!"

The subject of this comment was Little Oh-my.

As recklessly as the fugitive, he had leaped his horse into the river.

A splash which threw the water high into the air, and he disappeared from sight, to reappear dripping.

"Dang my skin ef he hain't done it!" cried Old '49. "Hyar, boys! Out with yer lariats! Thar's only one way to save that addlepate!"

Little Oh-my paid no heed to his own safety. His eyes were fixed on the girl.

Her horse swam low and evidently with painful effort, thrusting his head out of the water as if he were exhausted.

Little Oh-my's animal breasted the tide with sinewy thrusts; but his friends groaned again with dismay as they saw how rapidly he was borne down the stream.

"Throw yourself off and cling to his mane!" cried Little Oh-my.

But the terrified girl, who now seemed to realize for the first time her new peril, did not heed, if she heard, him. She only extended her arms toward him, crying:

"Save me!—oh, save me! I am innocent!"

Her voice was husky and shaken with hysterical sobs.

"She is nearly ready to swoon with fright and exhaustion!" thought Little Oh-my.

He saw her sway in the saddle. She clutched at the horse's mane. The animal uttered a whinny of terror, pawing the water in a desperate effort to keep its head from submerision.

At that critical moment an eddy caught it. The horse rose with a lunge into the air, and then went down out of sight.

With a despairing cry the girl lost her seat,

and she too went under, her hand, stretched out to Little Oh-my for help, disappearing last.

Little Oh-my was close at hand; but by a fatality the horse that the girl had ridden now rose between her and her rescuer.

He saw her rise to the surface, her long hair sweeping over her face.

She struggled feebly, and then went down again.

"Go!" cried the boy, giving his horse the spur.

The animal responded with a snort, his eyes flashing fire.

He rose in the water, pawing high. His hoofs struck the back of the other horse, bearing him down, once more out of sight.

A lurch, and he had swum over him.

Then Little Oh-my reached over, and caught a mass of floating hair.

A cheer rose from his friends as they saw him draw her up into his arms.

"He's got her, boys!" cried one.

"But we hain't got him!" interposed Old '49.

George Cameron felt his heart thrill with relief at the same time that a pang of envy knit his brows.

The girl was yet dimly conscious. She clutched Little Oh-my spasmodically. After a moment she began to gasp and strangle.

He was carried away with delight. Never before had he seen anything so beautiful as what he now held in his arms.

In her extreme pallor she looked sallow; but he knew that when those smoothly-rounded cheeks were flushed with the glow of health and happiness she must be even more lovely than her fairer sisters.

Then the dark Spanish eyes opened; and with a murmur of gratitude she clasped her arms about his neck, pressing her face against his breast.

But now came the task of getting back to shore.

They were very nearly mid-stream, sweeping down toward the fatal cascade with terrible rapidity.

Little Oh-my looked round and saw his danger.

"At any rate, I shall die with her in my arms!" he cried to his heart, clasping her passionately to him.

But he was far from being one of the dying kind. He had no notion of giving up the struggle yet.

Turning his horse, he started back toward his friends.

But now the tide was irresistible. The set of the water from the banks toward the center was too strong for unassisted equine muscles.

"Throw me a lasso!" he cried, holding up his hand.

The attempt was made; but the noose fell short.

And now he was in the rapids!

"Oh! we are lost!" cried the girl, gazing about in terror at the wildly eddying water.

"And I—I have drawn you to your death. Oh! I can never forgive myself!"

"You have drawn me to happiness!" said Little Oh-my.

But though he commanded his words, he could not command his feelings. The awe of approaching death was upon him. He gazed about with a half-dazed wonder.

"And this is death!" he said to himself.

"Five minutes from now I shall know nothing or perhaps *everything*!"

His heart swelled with the thought. The terror of giving up this life was swallowed up in the feelings that swept through him at the thought of the awaking in the next.

Then he saw one more chance for life, or at least a reprieve from instant death.

CHAPTER VII.

COURTSHIP UNDER DIFFICULTIES.

ALMOST on the brink of the precipice rose a rock, dividing the waters, to be reunited before the final plunge.

Turning his horse down-stream, he swam him so that he might approach the upper point of this rock in a direct line with the current. If he missed it by a yard on either side, he must inevitably be swept on down over that fatal leap into eternity! If he struck it exactly, he might hope to retain a footing there at least as long as his horse's strength held out.

His friends saw his aim, and sent him shouts of encouragement for even so slight an advantage.

"Ef he makes it, boys," cried Old '49, whose distress was plainly visible in his weather-beaten face, "we've got to git him off!"

"You jest bet we will!" was the hearty response of the others.

George Cameron was revolving a new thought in his mind.

"The man who brings her ashore saves her!" he said to himself. "What would be the use of his getting hold of her, if only to be swept with her over the falls?"

He had his hand on a long, slender Mexican lariat of braided horse-hair, which was coiled about his waist, hidden from view under a crimson silk sash.

The other members of the party were cow-boys who, organized under Old '49, had gone on a prospecting trip for the novelty of the thing and because a recent discovery of gold had turned the tide of excitement toward the section in which they happened to find themselves "out of a job."

They were all provided with lariats; but none of them knew that Cameron was similarly armed. Indeed they knew nothing about him, except that he was a likely enough fellow who had proposed to join them.

And now his heart swelled with exultation as he thought of his skill with the whirling noose.

Out in the stream the boy who might be riding to life or death had braced his nerves. His eye was fixed on the rock with the piercing glance of an eagle.

"Hold firmly to me, but do not move or even speak," he said, in a low tone to his companion.

She obeyed him to the letter. As his eyes were fixed upon the rock, so were hers fixed upon his.

She did not speak audibly; but she was praying for his preservation with her whole heart and soul.

"Such nobility!" she said to herself. "Surely the good God cannot let it perish from the earth in an act of mercy! Holy Mother intercede for him! But if it must be, receive us together into thy bosom!"

She felt the shock as the horse's hoofs struck the rock. Not knowing its significance, she closed her eyes with a shudder, bracing herself for the final agony, yet not forgetful that the arms of the brave youth were about her. She should cross the dark river in his company. Surely it would not seem so terrible.

"Saved!" cried Little Oh-my, exhilarated by the success of his endeavor.

"Saved!" she repeated, opening her eyes.

He felt her arms press him closer. It was the expression of her gratitude.

But the girl opened her eyes on a scene that was enough to try the stoutest heart.

Their downward course was arrested, it was true. The horse stood firm. But all about them was a wilderness of rushing waters.

Just below them she saw a thin line, the distance of which she felt that she could not estimate with any certainty, for beyond it objects were very much further off.

It was the line which marked the dropping of the waters out of sight!

She could hear their tumultuous roar. At one point she could see the spray rising from the depths below.

She shuddered with horror at the thought that death lay hidden there!

"We have one more hope," said Little Oh-my.

"If I could get free from the horse's back to the rock, I think I could almost promise you safety. But I will not attempt it while he stands firm. It will be a risky business, if it comes to that. They will try to get their lassoes to us. Keep up your courage, little one!"

"With you, my undaunted hero!" cried the girl, with the impulsiveness of her race.

But Little Oh-my was a Yankee, and not used to such out-spoken homage; so he flushed scarlet with embarrassed pleasure.

Meantime Marshal Probst stood on one bank watching events with a disappointed frown, quite helpless to interfere one way or the other, while the party of Little Oh-my's friends were making nervous preparations to attempt his rescue.

Under Old '49's direction they reached the nearest point, and from there began to throw their lassoes.

Again and again they tried, but the distance, the rushing water, and the wind which followed it, sucked over the near vortex, made their aim uncertain, and one and all failed.

"It's no use, Cap!" groaned Lariat Luke. "I allow to noose anythin' from a catamount to a whirlwind; but it ain't fur man to fetch that thar hoss."

"But we must fetch it!" cried Old '49, with the insistence of distress.

"It's all right, boys!" cried Little Oh-my, waving his hand to them. "The jig's up. It

is to be; so there's no help for it. If you ever have a notion to tell how I passed in my checks, say that I didn't squeal at the grand round-up. I'm sorry, though, that this little thing has got to go with me."

He turned to the girl and asked her:

"Have you any word you want to send to your friends?"

"Friends!" she repeated. "Oh, no; I have no friends. Every one has deserted me but you."

"Well, you kin tie to me for eternity!" cried Little Oh-my. "Is it a go? You may bet that I'll never desert you, nor, for that matter, let you out of my sight for a minute!"

He looked into her eyes with a tender smile.

She gazed back at him breathlessly.

"Oh! but you don't know!" she cried, panting. "They are after me for—*for—murder!*"

"Well, they haven't got you yet, have they?"

"But you would not wish—"

"To believe any such nonsense? Of course not!"

"You do not think that I did it?"

"I don't think anything about it. It's too preposterous for any one but Jake Probst to bother about for a minute."

"And yet you see me flying from him like a guilty creature."

"Like a fawn from a cougar, if you please."

"You believe that I am innocent without hearing a word—"

"Pro or con. Exactly! A child like you? What—"

"But I am *not* a child!" cried the girl, with sudden passion. "He had no right to treat me as he did! I did not kill him, but I would have done so rather than that he should have touched me! I am not sorry that one so wicked has gone where he can do no more cruelty!"

"No more am I!" cried Little Oh-my, ready to champion her cause without knowing anything about it. "So you see that we are agreed. Now about your friends. You *must* have somebody, you know."

"No, I have not."

"No father nor mother?"

"Nobody in all the world!" cried the girl, desolately.

Then, closing her arms about him more closely, she added:

"Nobody but *you!* You alone have been good to me in all my life!"

"Well," cried Little Oh-my, crimsoning with indignation, "I'd like to have traveled the same trail with you! There would have been some head-punching, you bet!"

The girl whispered in his ear:

"We are going the death-trail together!"

He was so thrilled by what her voice added to her words that he did not answer.

She looked up quickly, and asked:—

"Are you sorry?"

"Not I!" he cried, pressing her close in his arms.

"Then," she said, "I am not afraid!"

"Of the water?" he asked.

"Of anything," she replied. "Only," she added, "let us keep alive as long as we can."

"Why?" he asked, wondering what was passing through her mind.

"Because," she replied, "I want to thank you for your goodness to me. Anybody else might have doubted—ever so little, maybe; but you—"

She broke off her words, and let her actions finish for her.

Little Oh-my felt her cold lips pressed to the side of his neck.

It was a kiss of childish gratitude infused with a woman's love.

Little Oh-my was nineteen years of age. It was very young for marriage in a man born in a temperate clime. But to this child of the tropics he seemed a man of full development; and she, although she seemed so much a child to him, was indeed, as she had protested so warmly, no longer a child in feeling. Mothers of fifteen or sixteen are not so uncommon in her sunny Mexico.

A tremulous hush fell upon the lad. It dawned upon him that here was a woman of childlike innocence and simplicity—a creature of impulse that had suddenly been thrown into his arms by fate, to love and protect, if only he could escape from the death that threatened them.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Lola," she answered. "And yours? I want to put it into one last prayer to the Holy Mother!"

"In what connection?" he asked. "What do you want to say to her about me?"

"I want to beg her not to separate us!" she answered him, in a tender whisper.

Then with a sudden convulsive pressure of her clasping arms:

"Oh! if I thought that I had found you only to lose you again—"

"But you haven't! You may depend upon that!" he cried, with a bound of the heart.

"Your name?" she whispered, her breath fluttering as his lips pressed hers.

"Roy!" he answered.

"That means king—doesn't it? You are *my* king! Oh, Mother of Jesus! let me be with him always."

"In life!" cried Little Oh-my.

"In life, or in death!" she responded.

"In life!" repeated Little Oh-my.

There was an exultant ring in his voice. He threw up his hand. The girl glanced up and saw that he was not looking at her, but over her head.

Then she heard a whirring sound, followed by a shock as if they were about to be plucked from the saddle.

"It is the last dreadful moment! The poor beast has lost his footing!" she cried to her heart.

She uttered a scream, clung to her lover with a convulsive hug, and then held her breath.

She heard him cry once more:

"In life! In life! Thank God, in life!"

Then, dizzy with the reaction from her despair, she opened her eyes again and tried to realize what had happened.

Whatever it was, it was not death. The horse stood as firm as the rock on which his feet were planted!

"In life?" she asked, in a dazed murmur.

"In life!" he assured her. "My darling! my darling!"

And his lips closed down upon hers, bringing perfect faith and peace. He had said it, and she knew that it was so!

CHAPTER VIII.

A MURDERER AT HEART.

"GENTLEMEN, if you're all done, suppose you give me a try."

The men turned in surprise upon the quiet speaker.

George Cameron's face was as calm as his voice.

"What's that?" asked Old '49.

"I say, suppose you let me see what I can do."

"I didn't know that you could do anything with a lasso."

Cameron smiled quietly.

"It don't do to judge a man by his looks altogether," he said.

As coolly he began to unwind the *riata* from his waist.

"What! you have a lasso?" cried Old '49.

"Which I sometimes amuse myself with."

"Then why have you stood back?"

The brows of the old pioneer contracted.

"I was afraid that you professionals might think it cheeky for an amateur to interfere in your own line."

"When life is at stake, it don't matter who saves it!" said Old '49, severely.

George Cameron made no reply, but set to coiling the lariat over his hand.

"It ain't the fu'st time he's slung that business!" muttered one of the men.

"He's one o' yer highfalutin' chaps as thinks more o' his style than o' the life o' them as he don't jest happen to gee with!" answered another.

It was evident that the men thought that Cameron had been "playing" them. They watched him with jealous eyes.

Quite indifferent to the ill-feeling he had roused, Cameron took his position, measured the distance with his eye, whirled the noose round and round his head, and launched it forth into the air.

It shot out like a long, slender serpent, describing a long arc through the air, and falling over Little Oh-My's extended hand, so as also to inclose his body.

"Made it the first clatter!" cried one of the men, carried away with the beauty of the cast.

Something between a cheer and a yell of delight went up from Old '49.

The next instant he had the successful lassoer by the hand, his ill-feeling a moment before forgotten.

"I'll never furgit ye!" he cried. "Ef ever you want a solid friend, call on Ole '49! But this hyar ain't no time fur chin-music. Ef only the drag on the line don't loosen their foothold!"

Then he cried to Little Oh-my:

"How are ye out thar? Kin you stand the draught?"

"You bet!" replied Little Oh-my. "Throw us another one, Cameron! I'll make a sling, and we'll snake this little beauty over in a jiffy!"

He busied himself getting the noose over his head, and when this was accomplished secured it to his saddle-bow.

It was a ticklish operation; for the lariat sagging in the rapid current threatened to drag it out of his hands.

George Cameron made a second cast, as successful as the first.

Little Oh-my caught it, made a loop to run on the other as on a stay-line, and then secured it about Lola's body.

"It will half drown you," he explained to her; "for you will be under the water almost from the time you leave my hands till they pull you out at the other end. But they'll fetch you to all right. Don't be afraid. Try to hold your breath as long as you can. It will make it so much the easier for you when they come to pump you out!"

He spoke lightly, as if it were all a good joke. But the girl fixed upon only one idea.

"But we are not to be separated? You are not going to remain behind?"

"Two of us would be sure to pull Meteor off his feet," he replied. "When you are safe, I mean to swim him out, with their help."

"Oh! I cannot leave you here!" she protested, clinging to him. "I feel that if I once let go of you, I shall never clasp you again."

"That is only your woman's fears. Come! every minute lost is a strain on this noble fellow's endurance."

"Kiss me once again!" she whispered; and thrilled with a strange delight that he should be so dear to her, he complied.

After that she submitted herself implicitly to his will.

"Hold your hands out so," he directed, showing her the position which would be most likely to keep her afloat.

Then he let her down into the water.

"Oh! I shall die!" she cried, making a convulsive clutch at him.

"No, you will not," he assured her. "Now, steady!"

Then raising his voice, he shouted to the men ashore:

"Walk away there, lively!"

Three of the men had taken the other end of the sliding lariat over their shoulders, and they now started at a quick walk up the bank.

There was a terrible strain on the carrying hawse. It seemed as if the horse must be dragged from his footing.

The moment he had let go the precious burden of his love, Little Oh-my had drawn his bowie-knife.

With all his soul centered in watching, he held it in readiness to sever the hawse the instant the stay beneath him gave way.

If he and his noble beast must go over the falls, she at least should not be dragged over with them.

But the horse stood firm!

As he had foreseen, the girl was drawn under the water. He witnessed her vain struggles while she was going once more through the agonizing sensations of drowning. He knew that she would be drawn out unconscious; but that was the best that could be done in the circumstances. If she came off with life, that was all he could ask of Providence.

"Look alive there!" cried Old '49. "Double-quick! The hawse will stand it. It won't do to keep the leetle gal under water any longer than is necessary."

The men steadily quickened their pace.

As she neared the bank on their side the girl was once more drawn to the surface. But she had ceased struggling. She was unconscious.

"Two to one ef we fetch her out!" growled Old '49. "One sich duckin' ought to be enough in one day. Ding that thar bloodhound of a marshal! Eh! what's become of him?"

He looked across the river, to discover Jake Probst urging his way up the stream.

As soon as he saw that there was a likelihood of Lola's being got to the shore alive, the marshal had cried to his subordinate:

"They're goin' to fish her out fur us. When she lands, we want to be on hand. Come! pull foot hyar lively! Blow me ef it would sound well to have it said that the fu'st to slip through my fingers was a woman!"

"The bull-dog!" growled Old '49. "He ain't give it up yet! I'll hang ef he ain't proposin' to chip in hyar an' take her off our hands!"

"Well! he'll have his hands full if he does it!" cried George Cameron. "He'll find that we're not playing cat's-paw to his monkey."

"You bet!" cried the man next him. "I've got twelve shots that says he don't git her *this* time!"

And the others added their indorsement in characteristic phrase.

"Now then, steady!" shouted Old '49. "Steady! steady! So!"

He was on his knees on the verge of the river-bank, by which the water ran with dizzy velocity. He was about to bend far over, and lift the limp and dripping body from the flood, when George Cameron interposed:

"Hold on, old man! That's my part, if you please!"

Old '49 turned his head and glared into the cool eyes of the young man who showed no disconcertion.

"Your part?" he repeated. "She's Little Oh-my's quarry; an' I allow to stan' fur him—"

"His reach wasn't long enough to save her. It was my cast that brought her to land. But there is no time for words."

And as the body touched the bank he threw himself flat on the ground and reached for it.

Old '49 yielded with a troubled look.

"Thar ain't no lie in what you say," he said.

Little Oh-my had held Lola so that their heads were in a line with the vision of their friends ashore, and the tender passages between them had gone undiscovered.

"The boy will have to fight it out on his own hook," muttered the old ranger, as he saw his rival lift the unconscious girl out of the water. "Reckon, though, he kin hold his own with the most on 'em!"

Then he shouted:

"Raise her, boys! raise her!"

And such a cheer of rejoicing rose from the little band as was good to hear.

Over the water from Little Oh-my came a response. His heart was dancing to quick music. The boys cheered him in return.

"Now for my turn, Cameron!" he cried, cheerily. "Throw us another one of them greased garter-snakes of yours!"

"All right!" responded Cameron.

But it seemed to Old '49—perhaps because of his solicitude for the boy who was still in imminent peril, and would be so until he was actually on the shore beside them—it seemed to Old '49 that his voice lacked the hearty ring it ought to have had.

And his half suspicion was quickened when he saw Cameron kneel beside Lola and begin the manipulations proper for her resuscitation.

"Hold on," he interposed, "tell you git the lariat to Little Oh-my."

"But the girl must be revived," said Cameron, with a touch of impatience. "It won't hurt him to wait a minute."

"Anybody kin fetch the girl to," said Old '49. "Hyar's Ony Losy, that's followed the sea long enough to know more about it than you or me."

"An' it's roight ye air, Musther Mon!" cried Ony, speaking promptly for himself. "Faith, it's mony's the time I've pumped the in'ards—"

"An'," continued Old '49, unceremoniously cutting short the Irishman's loquacity, "ef he should *happen* to go over the falls through neglect of yours—"

He did not finish the sentence. His eyes were on those of his interlocutor with an intensity of gaze that would arrest the attention of any man.

George Cameron flushed purple. He would not have liked to have the meaning of that gaze interpreted into words even for his own ears!

He rose, and avoiding the eyes of the men who stood in silence, picked up the nearest lariat.

"Don't you lose no time starin'," said Old '49 to the salt, turned landsman.

"That I won't, yer honor!" replied Losy, touching his hat, Old '49's peremptory tone bringing this habit "to the fore."

He set to work forthwith, with a readiness which bespoke his skill, while Old '49 watched George Cameron.

That chagrined gentleman coiled his lariat with what seemed to the watching men less care than before. However, since so much depended upon him, no one ventured to run the risk of angering him by expostulation.

But Old '49 swore within himself:

"Ef the boy goes over through his willful carelessness, hang me higher'n ole Shasta ef I don't send a bullet through his murderer's top-knot!"

And the old man was likely to keep his word! Cameron made his cast; but the lariat tangled, and fell short.

"Cuss him! he's up to it!" growled the old man.

However he said nothing audibly.

Cameron uttered an oath, as if chagrined by his failure.

"This kind of thing will do pretty well for a washerwoman to dry her clothes on," he said, scornfully; "but I don't see how you can make anything of it as a lariat."

He proceeded to draw it in hand over hand; but Old '49 interposed.

"Don't waste time that way! Hyar's more. We may be able to find somethin' that's to your mind. Ef you want to save him, thar ain't no time to lose."

He coiled a lariat himself, and then handed it Cameron.

His work was done skillfully. He knew how to do it, and his boy's life hung upon it.

Cameron balanced it in his hand, and muttered:

"H'm!"

It was a grunt which said:

"If you're satisfied, I suppose I shall have to be; but don't blame me if the thing disappoints your expectations."

He made another cast.

The lariat shot through the air, and came so near Little Oh-my that he reached out and tried to catch it over his arm.

"Look out!" shouted Old '49, in a voice that showed the wild fear that shot to his heart.

"Don't do that! Thank God!"

His last ejaculation was caused by seeing the lariat drop into the water, out of Little Oh-my's reach.

Why he was thankful for this failure his next words showed.

"Boy! boy! be careful! Don't you know that ef thar that had nipped your arm, the pluck would have jerked you out of your seat? Let it pass an' try ag'in, rather than overreach yourself."

To himself he muttered:

"That devil was up to that trick! He'll drown the boy ef he kin! Ef he does, his turn'll come quicker'n he thinks fur!"

"If you will let me coil my own lariat," said Cameron, with the deliberation of a man who repudiated the blame of his failure and deprecated interference, "we will see if a line can't be got out there."

"Take it coolly, old fellow!" cried Little Oh-my. "Jest think that I can stay out hyar all summer, if necessary, an' it will steady your nerves."

"He never smells the rottenest mouse that was ever held under a man's noose!" groaned Old '49. "I wonder ef the other boys drop to it."

George Cameron coiled his lasso slowly, as if determined to have it right this time. Then he made a successful cast. The noose settled over Little Oh-my's body as neatly as before.

"Stove it off as long as he dast to!" growled Old '49. "It's lucky fur him that he made up his mind to do the square thing!"

Little Oh-my cut off an end of the lasso for a purpose which he had in view, and then secured the new end about his body under the arms.

The bit which he had cut off he fastened to his horse's girth, brought it up between his fore legs, and tied it to the lariat which was fastened to his saddle-bow.

If the beast were now drawn through a current against which it would be impossible for him to make head unaided, there would be no tendency to pull him off his balance.

"Now, old fellow!" cried Little Oh-my, patting the animal's neck fondly, "we're going to take our chance together."

Meteor whinnied, understanding the affection, if not the exact words.

"Is your end secure?" asked the lad of those ashore.

"As solid as the rock that this hyar pine grows out of!" was Old '49's assurance. "I tied that thar knot myself, an' you'd better believe I knowed what I was about when I done it."

"Then look out! We're coming!"

Little Oh-my had measured the distance to the bank, and also the distance to the brink of the precipice over which the waters poured.

"As we swing down the stream, we won't have two rods to spare. But that's enough, if the lassoes hold all round."

He drew in his breath, slipped from the saddle, and slapping his horse, said:

"Go!"

For an instant the animal trembled, as if he, too, understood the danger. Then drawing in his breath, as his master had done, he lunged out into the current.

CHAPTER IX.

"STANDING OFF" THE MARSHAL.

His eyes ablaze, his nostrils wide, Meteor breasted the waves, parting the foam on either side.

Still so rapid was the flood that the lariat grew as tense as a towline, snapping the drops of water from it where it cut the surface.

There was no attempt made to draw the horse against the current, but he was allowed to swing down-stream.

As Little Oh-my had calculated, he was within a rod or two of the precipice when he reached the bank.

His master made this trip with him, sustaining himself with one hand on the saddle-bow.

Little Oh-my was drawn out of the water first, but without waiting to exchange greetings he turned to the assistance of his noble horse.

The beast scrambled up the bank, shook his hide with less than his usual vigor, and then stood with his head lowered, receiving the attentions of the men.

The moment his horse was safe, Little Oh-my turned to look after Lola, but the men appeared to have gone wild over the horse. Every one had a hand in rubbing him down, even using their jerkins for that purpose.

Little Oh-my found George Cameron kneeling beside the girl, who, under Ony Losy's ministrations, was just beginning to show signs of returning consciousness.

"We owe everything to you!" cried our hero, grasping Cameron's hand gratefully.

In the exhilaration of the happy issue from their awful peril, he slapped his unsuspected rival on the back, continuing without break:

"You shall be master of ceremonies at our wedding!"

Cameron turned his head with a cold stare of displeasure.

"This is no time for joking," he said. "If you have no anxiety for the recovery of this lady, I shall have to ask you not to interfere with me while I am endeavoring to restore her."

"No anxiety?" repeated Little Oh-my, staring in wonderment. "Why, my dear sir, you are off your base!"

"We will discuss that later, if you please!"

"If you please!" returned Little Oh-my, with a show of quiet spirit that delighted Old '49.

"The young 'un'll take him down!" chuckled the old man. "Now fur it!"

"Meanwhile," pursued Little Oh-my, "I will thank you for your care of the lady, and relieve you for the present."

"Excuse me!" retorted Cameron. "Having brought the lady to shore, I shall continue at her side until she is in condition to care for herself."

Thereupon the whole situation flashed upon Little Oh-my. He had a rival! This fellow!—*this* fellow!

Thus far he had rather admired George Cameron. There was a style about him that the rougher men lacked. But all of a sudden he was transformed into a duffer who would be the very last man that any sensible woman would choose.

All of us out of knee breeches "know how this is ourselves!"

Little Oh-my flushed, and then turned pale.

"You are evidently laboring under a misapprehension," he said, putting a restraint upon the quick passion that surged up into his heart. "The lady has already expressed a preference for your humble servant—for *life*!"

The significant emphasis brought Cameron's eyes to the face of the speaker with a flash of surprise and incredulity.

"Why, she is a stranger to you!" he cried, indignantly.

"Until thirty minutes ago," corrected Little Oh-my, with a smile.

"H'm!" sneered Cameron; "your acquaintance *would* have progressed rapidly, if what you seem to intimate were true."

"You may depend upon it that it *is* true," said Little Oh-my, recovering his good-nature as he reflected at what a disadvantage he had his rival—"for which the peculiar circumstances of our introduction be thanked!"

His cool confidence and the happiness which glowed in his face went far in support of his words; and though it seemed incredible that a tender understanding should have sprung up between these two under his very nose, and he not discover it in progress, a chill foreboding of discomfiture shot to George Cameron's heart.

It angered him and awoke his obstinacy.

"Excuse me if I wait for the corroboration of the lady herself!" he said sarcastically. "This is a practical age, remember."

"Come! come!" said Little Oh-my. "I am too much in good-luck to want to quarrel with anybody. Besides, I owe you too much. I

don't forget that without your help I should still be out yonder—and, more than that, that she would be with me! Now, although I wouldn't give up the place at her side to any other man, nor to you under any other circumstances, I propose to divide the situation with you. Stay where you are, and I will take the other side. I have no doubt that she will give you friendship and gratitude while she gives me love."

He went to the other side and, kneeling down, took her other hand.

Only Losy had made a very liberal use of neat whisky in his course of treatment. He had poured a considerable quantity of it down Lola's throat just before Little Oh-my came up. During the discussion between him and Cameron she had shown signs of returning animation, and as he knelt at her side she opened her eyes.

His love taught him what to do. He gave her hand a quick pressure, and bending over her cried:

"Lola, my darling!"

She opened her eyes full upon his face, and with a murmur of glad recognition tried to lift herself up to his breast, releasing her hand from George Cameron's clasp.

The disappointed lover let her go with a suppressed oath, and had the further chagrin of seeing her nestle in his more fortunate rival's arms as he clasped her rapturously to his breast.

Old '49 was so delighted with the turn matters had taken that he proceeded to dance a jig on the spot.

But in the midst of his happiness Little Oh-my was recalled to a disagreeable reality by hearing the sound of horses' hoofs.

"Look hyere, gents," he said, hurriedly. "That iron-headed Probst is bound to carry his point. I depend upon you to stand him off while I take this innocent child to a place of security."

The men winked at each other. They had no sentimental reason for believing in Lola's innocence. At the same time, she being Little Oh-my's "girl," they had no thought of "goin' back on him."

He caught her up in his arms, and whistling to his horse, ran away with her.

Jake Probst rode up only to find his bird flown. He knew by the sullen defiance on the faces of some of the men, contrasted with the serene smile of welcome on Old '49's, just what he would have to encounter.

"Waal, pardner," cried Old '49, as if this were a casual meeting, "what luck? Out prospectin'?"

"No," replied Probst. "I'm out huntin' so to speak."

"Ah!" responded Old '49. "Mighty poor huntin', at this hyar season o' the year, I reckon."

"Waal, that depends," answered Probst. "You seem to have had considerable luck, fishin'."

"Now ye're jokin'!" said Old '49, laughing as if he considered it a very good joke indeed.

"Ef you'll hand the girl over, we'll call it a joke all round," said Probst, meaningly.

All understood that under his words lay a covert threat that they might find it no joke to resist the law, even in that lawless country, when it was represented by Jake Probst.

"The girl? What girl?" asked Old '49, innocently.

"Come! come!" said Probst. "That thar will do fur boys; but men at your time o' life an' mine know that business is business!"

"Ye're right," assented Old '49. "An' I allow you'll find us a business crowd."

Probst saw the old man's thinly-masked meaning. It roused his dogged determination. Turning to his subordinate, he said:

"Follow me!"

And without more ado he reined his horse in the only direction that Little Oh-my could have taken.

But Old '49 interposed.

"I wouldn't go that way," he said.

"Why not?" demanded Probst.

"Oh, because! That's the way we air goin': an' thar ain't room fur more'n our crowd, ye onderstand."

"Waal, then, I will go first, and you kin fol-ler at yer leisure."

"Excuse me, if you please!"

And the old man reined his horse across the way.

At that the Marshal of Two Bits flared up.

"Do you know who you're stoppin'?" he asked, with the ominous calm of a dangerous man.

"The Marshal o' Two Bits—the fire-eatin' "

Marshal o' Two Bits!" said Old '49, looking him steadily in the eye.

Then in the same tone he asked:

"Do you know who's a-stoppin' of ye?"

"No!" thundered the marshal; "an' what's more, I don't care a—"

"Barrin' an' savin' yer priseness!" interrupted his assistant. "Sure, it's haired words that air more handy than fair ones, but it's them you go furthest fur that's the ch'apest in the end. Wid all respect to yer honor, Musther Probst, w'u'dden't it be well to tell the gentlemen phwat it is the colleen has been doin'?"

The Marshal of Two Bits condescended to say:

"When you understand that the girl I am after has stabbed a man to death in a dance-house last night, maybe you'll stand out of my way, an' not interfere with the execution of the law."

"That may all be so," said Old '49. "As fur as we air concerned, it ain't neither hyar nor thar. The question is, who's goin' down that thar trail. You've been so rambunctious about it that we propose to fight it out on this line."

"Then you air goin' to stop me?"

"Our crowd is goin' down that thar trail fu'st, ur know the reason why! But we propose to have supper before we start. Then ef you want to foller, o' course the way is open to you the same as to any other man. That's all I've got to say."

Jake Probst looked about on the men.

There was a general loosening of weapons.

He understood, without verbal explanation, what that meant.

"All right!" he said. "Maybe I'll be even with ye yit! It'll be a cold day ef I don't!"

"Whenever you feel like comin' on, *en mass* or in sections, you'll find me at home," replied Old '49, coolly.

The marshal wheeled his horse and rode away.

Without stopping for their supper, our hero's friends followed after him.

There was one in the party who rode with his eyes on the ground in moody silence.

It is perhaps needless to say that it was George Cameron.

"He's hatchin' mischief!" said Old '49 to himself. "I'll have to keep an eye on him!"

CHAPTER X.

A NEW ASPECT.

THE gossip over the tragedy reached Senor Fabriano as he sat in the bar of his hotel, gloomily brooding over his unpromising interview with the marshal.

At first he did not heed it, until something in the description of the stiletto with which the deed had been done caught his ear.

Then suddenly starting up, he advanced to the speakers, addressing them in agitated tones:

"Gentlemen, I beg your pardon!"

The men turned and stared at him, with the quick-coming frown which bespoke their dislike, one of their number vouchsafing surlily:

"Waal, what's wantin'?"

"Did you say, sir, a dagger with a wavy blade?—in short, an Indian creese?"

"Injun nothin'," growled the man. "Injuns don't use them kind o' things."

"I should have said *East Indian*, or more properly Malay."

"Waal, you've got me, I'm free to own. I don't know nothin' about none o' yer yellere-faced kind, I don't! Malays or what-not, I reckon they're a bad lot all round. But, for one, I don't see what it is to you, anyhow!"

The tone, more than the words spoken, conveyed an insult.

With difficulty the Mexican controlled the swelling in his throat.

"Thank you!" he said, and turned away.

As he hurried from the room, the men followed him with sullen frowns.

"What does the dog-gone Greaser mean by comin' sneekin' around hyar, anyway?" muttered the man who had repaid his courtesy with insult.

Forgetful of the churls he left behind, the Mexican hurried to the scene of murderous violence.

Here men involuntarily made way before his impetuous advance.

His face told them that his was not the idle curiosity that moved them.

"Where is the murdered man?" he asked.

"This hyar way, pardner," readily answered the man addressed.

And half-escorted, half-followed by the curious crowd, he was borne to the side of the corpse.

"Who is he? What is he wantin' with Milado?" was the eager inquiry.

With knit brows and closely-compressed lips he gazed at the repulsive body.

"Will some one kindly get me some water?" he asked. "I cannot make out the features for the blood."

"Hallo, thar! Some water!—fetch some water this way!"

Everybody was eager to hasten its production.

Then all hung upon the result.

Senor Fabriano knelt down and dipping his handkerchief into the basin, washed away the blood and brushed back the matted hair from the forehead of the dead.

He rose with a sigh, as if his expectations had been disappointed.

"Who has the dagger with which this man was slain?" he asked.

"What do you make of him, boss?" interrupted one who was more curious than sympathetic.

"Some o' your folks, I reckon?" ventured another.

"They don't look much alike," dissented a third.

"Dry up, an' let the gents speak for himself!" cried one who saw that nothing was likely to be derived from the speculations of the crowd.

"Gentlemen, this man is nothing to me, as you seem to expect," said the Mexican, seeing that he would have to satisfy their curiosity before he could hope to get anything in the way of information out of them.

"Why in thunder didn't you say so in the first place?" demanded one, who thereupon turned away in disgust.

"What did you want with him, then?" asked one, who saw another field of inquiry.

"It may be," said the Mexican, sadly, "that by his death this man has but made more hopeless the wrong which he did me in life."

"What has he done to you?"

"Excuse me, gentlemen! I am not yet sure that there is any connection between him and me. We were speaking of the weapon with which the fatal blow was struck. Can you tell me where I can see it?"

"Jake Probst has got it."

"The marshal?"

"Exactly."

"And where is he to be found?"

"You'll have to pull foot purty lively to overtake him, stranger. He's goin' fur the leetle spitfire that laid Milado out—an' sarved him jest right, say I!"

"He is in pursuit of the misguided girl?"

"Hold on, stranger! Don't you go fur to callin' no hard names! She give this ugly cuss his dose; an' I reckon Probst'll swing her if he kin. But the man as says that she was misguided will have to swaller two shootin'-irons an' a rib-tickler, the which these hyar is samples!"

And most ferociously did Lola's champion brandish his weapons, confronting the supposed traducer of the favorite as if about to carry his threat into instant execution.

"You misunderstand me, friend," said the Mexican, mildly. "I meant but to say that it was unfortunate that the child should be led to take blood upon her hands. It may be that I, of all men, have most reason to thank you for your generous defense of her."

"Why? What is she to you?"

"It is possible that she is my daughter."

The crowd stood open-mouthed.

"Run away with Milado, I reckon?" ventured one.

"Abducted in her childhood," explained Senor Fabriano.

"Sho', now! You don't say!"

In those simple words were expressed as genuine sympathy as ever warmed in a human heart. In the wronged and suffering father the "Greaser" was lost sight of. In a breath four-fifths of the crowd went over to the side of the man whom a moment before most of them had despised, now ready to go through fire and water to help him right his wrongs.

"Look a-hyar, boys!" cried one. "Jake Probst don't touch a hair o' that thar gal's head, ye onderstand?"

"Not much he don't!" was the hearty assent.

"Boss, we're with ye! You jest clap onto yer own when the marshal fetches her into camp, an' you'll have the backin' o' the last man in the place."

"Thank you, my friends!—thank you!" said the Mexican, with deep emotion, grasping the hands that were warmly extended to him on all sides.

"Boys, we don't want that bloody marshal to "

scare the life out of her, as he will do ef he once claps his hands onto her. Suppose we make after him in a body?"

This proposition was received with hearty approval.

Horses were saddled in hot haste, and soon, with Senor Fabriano at their head, the better part of Two Bits were following the road previously traversed by pursued and pursuer.

They met the marshal returning, chagrined at his defeat.

It is needless to say that he was far from being in the best of humors.

"Whar is yer prisoner?" asked one of the men.

"If I had a prisoner, she would be hyar, wouldn't she?" asked the marshal, gruffly.

"Thar's no lie in that, be the powers!" laughed an Irishman.

"Come, Micky!" cried another. "We'll git nothin' out o' Jake. What luck?"

The "mairshal's depity" cast a look at his superior.

There was no prohibition there; so taking his consent for granted, he answered:

"Well, b'ys, it's haired luck, an' that's a fact! We came upon her, so we did; an' would yez b'lave me?—fast aslape!"

"Oh, go 'long! What're ye givin' of us?"

"Be mesowl, it's but the Lord's blessed truth! Ax the mairshal else."

"What's Paddy tryin' to git through him, Jake?" asked the skeptic.

"You'll have to fight it out between ye," said Probst.

Thereupon Micky was cross-examined until the whole story was drawn from him.

"Little Oh-my!" cried one.

"Don Carlos!" echoed another.

"Look a-hyar, boys! Thar's somethin' snide hyar. I'll bet ye that gal never touched Milado.

It was a plot to steal her. It's Don Carlos as done it. Of course he wouldn't have no use fur Milado after he had run off with his gal. So it would stand him in hand to rub him out. Then, as you'll all allow, if he could make it appear that the gal had doused Milado's glim, an' was givin' the marshal the slip, he'd stand ten chances to one of gittin' away with her over what he would have if it looked as if she was bein' run off."

"Johnny, you've got a head on your shoulders, you have!"

And the whole crowd accepted this explanation at a jump.

The marshal alone frowned. He had the instinct of a hangman. Having once marked Lola as his victim, he clung with the pertinacity of a bull-dog to his hatred of her.

"I beg that you will allow me to see the weapon with which the deed was done," said Senor Fabriano, politely.

And he entered once more upon the explanation of his interest in Lola.

Probst grudgingly yielded it up for inspection.

At sight of it the father uttered a cry.

He caught it from the hand of the marshal, and bent over it, overcome with emotion.

"Gentlemen," he said, finally lifting his head, and disclosing eyes whose infinite sadness, inter-shot with rays of tenderness and joy, was blinded with tears, "it is indeed a weapon which disappeared with my child. It was her mother's. I pray the merciful Father that I may find that her use of it was justifiable and in self-defense!"

"You bet yer life it was! That dog of a Greaser would drive an angel to put a knife into him!" cried one whose sympathy outran his reverence.

"But, friends," said Senor Fabriano, "may I count upon your assistance to rescue my child from this outlaw?"

"Now ye're shoutin'!"

"Ef thar ain't men enough in Two Bits, I'll guarantee to have a grand round-up of the whole country!"

With like expressions the better part of the company expressed their hearty co-operation.

Jake Probst was long-sighted enough to see the trend of public sentiment which would leave him entirely out of consideration, if he persisted in his opposition; so he made haste to say:

"I was on my way back to camp to muster enough men to go after the outlaw himself. Seeing that we are together, we might as well go for him now as ever."

"Lead the way!" was the general demand.

And the party, formally under the lead of the marshal, but really in support of the wronged father, forthwith set out in pursuit of the supposed outlaw and his victim.

CHAPTER XI.

TREACHERY.

"HALLO! I didn't look for you so soon!" cried Little Oh-my, when he was overtaken by his friends.

"Then you see us sooner than you expected," laughed Old '49. "Perhaps sooner than you wanted!" he added, with a fly glance at Lola, whom Little Oh-my held in his arms, as they rode double.

She flamed scarlet; but her lover laughed good-naturedly.

"None o' that, you old dog-in-the-manger!" he cried.

And then, to spare Lola the rough, though friendly banter of the men, he changed the subject.

"So you managed to stand off the marshal?"

"You bet we did!"

"I reckon he don't take kindly to humble pie."

"Not hel. An' he's one o' the kind as it don't set well on their stomach. He'll come fur ye ag'in; you kin count on that!"

"Thar's no doubt of that; and he won't come alone next time."

"Right you are, boy."

"Daddy, I've made up my mind that this ain't a healthy country. I'm goin' to git out of it."

"You could do a dog-goned sight foolisher thing than that thar!"

"You understand I wouldn't run away if I was alone."

"Waal, I reckon!"

"But a tender little thing like this can't stand much fightin' over."

"Ef your head was as old as mine, you couldn't talk better hoss sense than that."

"I don't like to lose you, daddy—you know that!"

"I don't know nothin' else!" cried the old man, not a little affected by this mark of his favorite's affection for him.

"What's the use?" cried Little Oh-my, with sudden impulsiveness. "You haven't got anything to tie you up in this God-forsaken country!"

"No more I have, boy," admitted Old '49.

"Then why can't you come along with me?"

"An' the gal!" added Old '49, with one of his sly winks.

"My wife!" declared Little Oh-my, boldly.

"The first thing I'm goin' for is a parson. Then, ho for Texas! It will be better for my wife to return to the climate that she was born to, even if these ugly hounds weren't after her."

"You should stop and vindicate her from the charge that has been brought against her," suggested George Cameron.

"Hang their charge!" cried Little Oh-my, passionately. "What are they or their charge to me, so long as I know that she is all right?"

"Hyar! hyar!" cried Old '49.

"And look hyar, boys," pursued Little Oh-my. "What have you made since you shock bull-whackin' an' took to prospectin'?"

"Not a dog-goned red!" assented one, with energy.

"What do you say to goin' back in a body?"

"I say go!"

"Me, too!"

"I'm with ye!"

"Of course we are—all of us!" cried Old '49, delightedly. "Boys, we'll scoop in our pay when we git back to camp; an' then the old feller himself can't keep us in this hyar blasted country!"

It was so arranged, George Cameron being by this move made an outsider. He alone was not of the party that had come up from the broad grazing-lands of sunny Texas.

He saw in this move the defeat of all his hopes, and his clouded face showed his discontent.

"It aitches you, don't it?" chuckled Old '49 to himself.

"He shall never take her out of this country, if I have to drop him with my own hands!" was the murderous resolve that was seething in Cameron's hot brain.

"It won't do to leave too broad a trail," said Little Oh-my. "Besides, the news may have spread so rapidly as to get the start of us. I propose to keep Lola out of sight until we are well on our way."

"An' very sensible too," approved Old '49.

"The easiest way is the best way."

"You know the lean-to we struck up in what I called Sinbad's gulch?"

"Yes."

"Waal, I'll take her there. You're to fetch me the first parson you can lay your hands on; and we'll do the job up in short order."

"We kin git a parson at Fort Monico—the chaplain."

"That's the man we want! And, boys, there's another reason why I should make myself scarce—the funniest you ever heard!"

"What's that?"

"They've done me the honor to take me for Don Carlos! Hal hal hal!"

"The deuce you say!"

"It's a fact. They came within an ace of stringing me up last night. The whole crowd swore that I challenged the coach and led the road-agents throughout. I suggested that I followed the road-agents; but they wouldn't have it so. Hal hal hal!"

And once more Little Oh-my laughed light-heartedly.

"Waal, I swear!" cried Old '49, turning red with indignation. "It'll be a burnin' shame ef we don't walk into that camp an' swab it out before we leave these parts!"

"Oh, no!—that's of no consequence," said Little Oh-my.

He dismissed the subject from his mind thus lightly.

Would he have done so if he could have known the quick plot that sprung up in George Cameron's mind?

"Suspected of being Don Carlos!" he cried to himself. "The passengers testified to his identity with the robber! Ahal! I'll make a note of that!"

Little Oh-my soon separated from his friends, making his way alone to the mountain retreat which he had designated.

They went on to Fort Monico.

"We'll wind up our business hyar to-day, an' take the parson back with us to-morrow," said Old '49, who was anxious to "git shut o' the blasted place," now that it was decided to go.

"Then you have fully made up your minds to abandon this enterprise?" asked George Cameron.

"That thar's jest what we've done, young man!" was Old '49's assurance.

"It leaves me all afloat," said Cameron, wistfully.

"Why don't you strike hands with us, an' make a change of base?" asked one of the boys, who liked Cameron.

"Well, I hadn't thought of that," he replied.

"But perhaps it wouldn't be such a bad scheme after all."

"Of course it wouldn't. You could strike a worse crowd than ours, now mind I tell you; an' I know what I'm talkin' about, fur I've been thar!"

Several others joined heartily in this invitation. They did not notice that Old '49 received the proposition in cold silence.

"Well, boys," said Cameron, "I don't mind saying that I am taken with your style, what I have seen of you so far; and I don't care if I do put in a little of a different life from what I've been used to. But if there is only twenty-four hours to pull up stakes in, I shall have to make a bee-line for Sioux Pass, and straighten up some little matters of my own. Where shall we rendezvous?"

"At the hut where Little Oh-my is housin' his heifer. We'll start from thar—won't we, Old '49?"

"I reckon we will," said the old man, with no cordiality.

He was racking his brain for some way to leave Cameron behind without coming out against him directly.

"He'll try to make trouble between Little Oh-my an' his wife. That's his little game," muttered the old fellow to himself. "He's sot fur her; an' he's one o' the kind that don't let up easy."

"At what hour?" asked George, ignoring the old man's crustiness.

"We won't start before noon, will we?" asked one of the younger men, seeing that Old '49 acted as if he did not think that the question was directed to him.

"I reckon not," was the reply.

"Well, then, I'll leave you at the next cut-off," said Cameron.

He rode along, chatting with those about him so pleasantly that they began to feel that they had not done him justice. They all admired his skill with the *riata*, and had none of Old '49's suspicions of the times that he had failed.

"Hasta manana!" he cried jauntily, as he reined his horse into a bridle-path leading off from the way they were following; and putting spurs to his horse, disappeared.

When he was gone a vague feeling of disquiet took possession of Old '49.

"It can't be that he has enough o' cussedness

in him to go fur to waylay Little Oh-my!" he reflected.

The more he thought of it, the more uneasy he got.

"I'll git back thar before sundown—that's what I'll do!" he finally concluded. "Money ur no money, he ain't goin' to git a crack at the boy in the dark, ye onderstand?"

Thereupon he hurried the advance of his party without assigning any reason.

Into Fort Monico they rode at a spanking pace, and Old '49 made straight for the chaplain.

"Boys," he said, "I'll leave you to straighten up, while I take the parson to Little Oh-my."

"What's the hurry?" was the surprised demand.

"Waal, I reckon it'll be a satisfaction to the boy to have his contract signed an' sealed an' over with, ef he's goin' in fur the thing at all. I allow committin' mattermony is a good deal like murder. Ye don't want the thing too long on yer mind."

The boys laughed at the old fellow's theory of the marriage relation.

"Was you ever married yerself, Old '49?" asked one.

"M-m, waal," was the hesitating reply, "I was a squaw-man onc't, fur a leetle while, when I was a good deal younger than I be now. But them was beathen ways o' doin' things; an' so, o' course, they don't count much."

He laid the urgency of the case before the chaplain with such eloquence, that he induced that gentleman to forego the society of the captain's sister and several other charming ladies of the post, for a very uncomfortable night-ride in the robber-infested mountains.

The sun had dropped down behind the peaks when they reached the hut where Little Oh-my was to await his friends.

What they found there was a pool of blood before the empty hut!

"My God!" cried Old '49, in tones that quivered with anguish, "he's done it!"

"What is it?" asked the chaplain, apprehensively.

"That devil has murdered the boy, an' made off with his gal—that's what it is! May my curse foller him until I git my hands on his throat!—that's all I ask."

But at this moment something caught his ranging eye, and with an ejaculation of horror he broke through the undergrowth so as to disappear from the clergyman's sight.

A moment of deathlike silence followed. What terrible spectacle had chained his tongue?

But before the startled divine could make a move to relieve his suspense, there came from beyond the foliage a burst of laughter so wild in its abandonment that there could be no question that it was one in which happiness formed no element.

It ended in a yell of savage exultation; and then came Old '49's voice:

"Frizzle my hide, ef that thar ain't the purtiest sight I ever did see! Wake snakes an' howl; fur the devil has got his own!"

CHAPTER XII.

AN INVADED EDEN.

GEORGE CAMERON'S proposal to go to Sioux Pass and straighten up his affairs was a "blind," as indeed was the whole scheme of going to Texas with the party of cowboys. He had no such purpose.

The moment he was free from observation, he cried to himself:

"Now for some quick work! That old duffer suspects me—as well he may!—and if I don't cut in ahead of him, he will block my game yet."

Taking the direction of Two Bits, he spurred at his best pace.

Thus he rode headlong into the party who were going to the rescue of Lola and the capture of Little Oh-my, supposed to be Don Carlos.

"Hallo! what's yer hurry?" cried Jake Probst, suspiciously, as George reined his horse up on his haunches.

"You're just the man I want to see!" cried George, breathlessly.

"H'm! that's curi's, bein's as you're jest the man I want to see. I allow to have seen you before."

"You have."

"In deuced bad company!"

"I don't deny that."

"Waal, sir, what have you got to say for yourself?"

"Nothing, except that I have met you on my way to put myself at your service in Two Bits."

"We have your word fur that," said the marshal, with an air which intimated that it would need corroboration.

"You will have more tangible proof before sunset, if you don't waste too much time in palavering. Let us be moving while we talk."

"That depends on whar we're to be movin' to."

"I take it for granted that you gentlemen are in quest of Don Carlos."

"That's the man we're after. You kin bet on that."

"Well, I propose to put you onto him, so that you can take him without any trouble except what he can give you by himself."

"Young man, you talk well."

"You will soon be satisfied that I act as I talk."

"Ef you don't, look out fur yerself! I'm a man as don't stand no snide games, ye onderstand?"

"Sir," here interposed Senor Fabiano, "can you assure me of the safety of a lady whom this outlaw holds as a prisoner?"

Cameron turned to the speaker quickly. What was his interest in Lola? He noted that he was a Spanish-Mexican.

While resting under his suspicious scrutiny, Senor Fabiano hastened to explain:

"It is possible, nay, probable, that I have a father's interest in her welfare."

Cameron was far from being pleased with this announcement; but in a flash he saw that he would have to accept the situation, and turn it to account as best he could.

His role was chosen instantly. Extending his hand with a cordial smile, he cried:

"My dear sir, it will double the pleasure of what I am about to do, to know that I shall restore a deluded girl to the loving protection of her father. But, sir, you must be prepared for a painful revelation."

"I have had a long schooling in pain!" said the father, bowing his head as if to receive another blow.

"Believe me, I would spare you this if I could," said Cameron, with affected feeling. "But there is this consolation—that it is not beyond repair."

"Speak, sir!"

"I said that your daughter was deluded. Her romantic fancy has been caught by the part played by Don Carlos in her rescue from the Snake river. I do not wish to drag into prominence my own efforts; but the marshal here is witness that but for me they would have perished together."

"I'm beholden to ye fur not letting them slip through my fingers!" said Probst, grimly.

"It is but a passing fancy," pursued Cameron. "I should not have felt justified in interfering, had I not known that Don Carlos already has a wife in Arizona, and another in Texas. When the poor child comes to know the wrong he meditates against her, it will dispel her momentary prepossession."

"Sir, from the bottom of my soul I thank you!" cried the Mexican, with deep feeling, as he again pressed the hand of the hypocrite.

"From the amicable relations that appear to exist between you and the marshal, I assume that no charge rests against the lady. I was about to make one condition on which I would give Don Carlos into his hands—that a full and free pardon be extended to the girl, whatever she may have done."

"Knowing her history, I have no fear that the men of Two Bits will hold her to too severe a reckoning, whatever may be proved against her."

"Right you are, boss!" cried one of the men. "Thar don't no investigatin' committee set on ber—ah, boys?"

"Nary commit!"

"She goes scot free, ef I have to fight fur her single-handed!"

"You won't be alone, pardner—no fear o' that!"

"You bet yer boots!"

"Count me in, ef you please!"

And with looks, if not with words, the whole party showed their sympathy with the girl who was felt to have been more sinned against than sinning.

"Well, gentlemen," said Cameron, "let us make all dispatch. Don Carlos is alone, his men having gone to get their traps together preparatory to a remove. He is a villain with refinement enough to prefer that his nefarious life should not be known to the woman who fancies that she is his wife; so he proposes to go through forms of a marriage before the chaplain of Fort Monico, and then go to a part of the country where he can live with her in re-

tirement, and pursue his crimes without the danger of being brought up by a Marshal Probst."

Jake Probst frowned and grunted at this compliment. He did not cotton to Cameron.

"There is but one further stipulation," pursued the traitor, turning to him.

"An' what's that?" he asked, brusquely.

"That my reason for temporarily joining the outlaws shall not be inquired into," replied Cameron, boldly.

He was playing a desperate game desperately, or he would not have avowed himself a road-agent when such was not the fact.

"I will make this agreement," said Probst—"ef we git Don Carlos, you go free; only ef I ever ketch you ag'in, look out! Ef we don't git Don Carlos, we'll hang you higher'n Haman!"

"That is satisfactory," said Cameron, who, whatever his faults, was no coward.

So they rode rapidly forward, every moment bringing them nearer the paradise where Little Oh-my, in the first transports of love, was playing Adam to his beautiful Eve.

The hut where he had appointed his rendezvous was a mere lean-to, built as a temporary shelter by some prospectors.

Abandoning themselves to childlike glee, Lola and he were making their short residence there a picnic.

They gathered fresh mountain moss and strewed it under the lean-to, covering it with the blanket carried under Meteor's saddle, so as to form a comfortable couch for the bride of the morrow, her groom having to content himself for the nonce with the bare ground outside.

Prudence cautioned them not to build a fire, which might lead their enemies to their cosy nook; so they gathered berries and some succulent plants of which Little Oh-my knew.

"Couldn't you find some bird's eggs, or get a little goat's milk?" asked Lola, glancing up at her lover shyly.

It was the first thing she had asked of him—not an easy task, under the circumstances.

"Well, I can make a big try for it!" he said, his heart swelling so that he felt almost equal to the seven labors of Hercules. "Won't you come with me?"

"I am a little—just a little tired," she answered, blushing divinely.

Then it struck her all of a sudden that she was imposing an indefinite tax on him when he might need rest.

"Oh, how selfish of me!" she cried. "Of course, you are tired too."

"Not a bit of it!"

"You would not own it, to be sure. But I will not let you go, unless you promise to be back in an hour, whether you are successful or not."

"Well," said Little Oh-my, scratching his head with a comical smile, "an hour is about as long as I could bear to be out of your sight, and that's a fact!"

"You expect something for that speech, don't you?" she laughed.

"Small favors thankfully received, and large ones in proportion!" quoted our hero.

"We'll wait until you get back, and then see about it," replied his sweetheart, with the subtle instinct which teaches some women to fan the flame of love with suggestion, while not cloying it with satiety.

Little Oh-my left her, puzzled by a something in her manner which eluded him when he tried to define it. It was a glance in her eye and the flitting color in her cheeks. It kept his thoughts busy with an itching curiosity, and he longed to get back to her.

"Turtles' eggs will do duty for one," he said; "but milk! I can't very well lasso a mountain goat!"

And he laughed at the suggestion.

In the sunny shallows of a stream which ran by the lean-to he found the soft shelled eggs in abundance.

Then fortune favored him, and he suddenly found himself at the mouth of the pocket in the hills, in the center of which, in an attitude of alarm, stood a doe with a suckling fawn.

There was no escape save to pass him; and the opening was so narrow that he could almost have caught her with his bare hands.

Trembling with delight, and praying that she might not start to make the dash before he could unwind the lariat from his waist, he stood perfectly still while he loosened it, yet in such a way that it would not impede his movements if he had to try to seize the fawn in passing as a last resort.

It proved that the chances were so slim that the doe hesitated to take them until it was too late.

He unwound his lasso and coiled it over his hand while she stood deliberating.

Then he began to advance upon her.

She became restless, and ran from side to side, followed by her bleating fawn.

Nearer and nearer he drew, until she was forced to make the attempt to break past him.

Then, while she was in full career, he whirled the *riata* round and round his head. It shot forth like a long, pliant serpent, with the fatal noose as its head, which fell over her neck.

Then running so that a tree intervened between them, Little Oh-my snubbed her up with a twang that threw her in a heap.

In a moment he was upon her; and with his knee on her neck so that she could not rise, he threw bights of the lasso about her flying feet until she was helpless in its trammels.

"Gently! gently, my girl!" he cried. "I am so grateful to you for enabling me to gratify the first wish of my little donna, that I wouldn't harm you, beyond the fright and the loss of your milk, for the world!"

He shook his canteen. By the swash of the liquor within, he judged that it must be half full.

"It would break Old '49's heart to see so much precious corn-juice go to waste!" he laughed; "but corn-juice stands no show against milk just now," and deliberately he drew the stopper, and poured the contents on the ground.

Then, while the fawn he was robbing ran about bleating pitifully, he milked his flask full.

"I'd like to have Lola see the fawn," he said. "She would be delighted with it. But then the sight of the dam's distress might take away her appetite for the milk. It's curious how tender-hearted these little dears are!" and with this reflection he released the terrified animal.

It is needless to say that she whisked out of sight without stopping to ask why she was spared.

Little Oh-my was in ecstasy. His allotted hour was not half gone, and he had succeeded in both his quests.

Cautiously he stole back, wishing to give his sweetheart a surprise, and wondering what he would find her doing. He got just where he could see her head and shoulders, when the snapping of a twig under his incautious tread betrayed him; she whisked about with a startled look, screamed, and dropped out of sight.

Somewhat startled himself at her strange behavior, he leaped over the intervening bush, to discover her sitting on the ground and industriously spreading her short skirts over her feet.

"Oh! go away! go away!" she cried, in pretty dismay.

A pair of sorry-looking slippers standing on a stone, flanked by an exquisitely clocked stocking, the mate to which the embarrassed little damsel held in her hand, explained the situation to Little Oh-my.

It will be imagined that she was sadly dragged by being pulled up the clayey bank after her ducking in the Snake river; and it now appeared that she had got rid of her lover on the pretext of sending him for eggs and milk, so that she might wash the soil from her garments, though there was no possibility of drying them.

Little Oh-my was delighted at this sign of personal pride of the right sort.

"If you had only stayed ten minutes longer!" she cried, ruefully.

"If you don't make it the shortest ten minutes of your life, I'll smother you when I get hold of you!" he cried, as he complied with her wish, leaving her once more.

He went to look after Meteor; but his thoughts were going out into the future, picturing scenes of happiness that made his heart leap until it seemed as if it would suffocate him.

The great waves of delight that swept through him must find relief in action, and he leaped upon the horse and coursed down the gulch.

What was his dismay to rush headlong upon a party of horsemen coming into the pass!

He saw the Marshal of Two Bits in advance, with George Cameron on one side of him and a man whose aristocratic features and noble bearing proclaimed him a Spanish gentleman on the other.

At sight of him a look of demoniac triumph leaped into Cameron's face.

"There he is!" he cried, pointing toward Little Oh-my, who had drawn his horse on his haunches.

"Betrayed!" cried our hero, grasping the situation at a glance.

And wheeling his horse short round, he fled, though there seemed little chance of escape.

"After him! after him!" shouted Probst, digging his spurs into his horse's flanks with no thought of mercy.

"Take him dead or alive!" cried Cameron, knowing the value of a suggestion of that kind in the desperate struggle that was about to ensue.

"Lola! Lola!" cried our hero, as he fled toward her.

But one thought was shooting its fiery darts through his brain.

"If I can but get her up before me! If she will only have the presence of mind to simply stand still and let me catch her, I can swing her up as if she were a feather!"

His great love, his mighty despair, made him feel that he could perform any feat that would place her safely in his arms.

But his foes—their foes!—pressed close at his heels. A moment lost could never be regained. The wild rout of that life and death chase swept up the gulch before them, startling the timid girl into breathless alarm.

She sprang to her feet and stood with head up and eyes gleaming, her hands pressed upon her fluttering bosom.

"Lola! Lola!" his voice rung out.

"Roy! oh, Roy!" she responded, and sprung in the direction whence his agonized voice came.

He came crashing through the foliage, his wild eyes seeking her.

She saw him and threw out her arms toward him with a cry in which heart spoke to heart.

"Stand still and let me lift you!" cried Little Oh-my.

She divined his purpose, and assisted him with quick wit, by leaping upon a rock, where she awaited him with extended arms.

"Take me!" she cried.

And in those tones her heart's love called to him.

"Thank God!" he aspirated, as he bent to clasp her. "My darling! my darling!"

At that moment a shot rung out sharp and clear.

She saw Little Oh-my start with a quick gasp, and knew that he was hit.

"*Madre Maria!*" she murmured, and leaping forward, threw her arms about his neck.

He received her, clasping her close; but with the effort consciousness faded out, his muscles relaxed, and by the impetus of her body he was swept from the saddle, they falling together on the other side, while Meteor sped on without them.

A moment later they were surrounded by their enemies.

But neither knew it. The fall had stunned Lola. She too was at peace.

CHAPTER XIII.

CAUGHT IN HIS OWN TRAP.

THE cruel shot had been sped by George Cameron's hand. The abandon of love with which Lola gave herself to her lover's arms had fanned his jealousy into a flame that left him reckless of consequences.

"Curse him!" he had almost shrieked, "he shall never clasp her in his arms again!"

Then he had fired, and greeted the fall of his rival with a wild laugh of fiendish exultation.

He was the first to throw himself from his horse and kneel beside the hapless lovers, to tear the faithful Lola from the breast which was her chosen refuge.

But before his hands touched her, the Marshal of Two Bits alighted beside him, and clutching him by the throat, hurled him back.

"Curse you!" he shouted, springing upon him, and planting his foot with no gentle weight on his breast, as he lay supine, "if you have cut in ahead ahead of me, you shall swing in his place, so help me God!"

Half-stunned and altogether breathless, George Cameron made no verbal reply; but the dull glare in his eyes showed the murderous hatred with which he resented the indignity put upon him.

Leaving them to settle their dispute as pleased them best, Senor Fabiano bent and lifted the girl who might prove to be the daughter he had mourned for years, to find her at last alive, but under the shadow of a capital crime.

What pen can describe the emotions with which he turned her face toward his eager gaze!

One glance into those white, immobile features; a masterful struggle against the vertigo that threatened to deprive him of consciousness; and clasping her with an energy that seemed as if it would press her into his swelling heart, he

bowed his face upon hers, suffusing it with tears and kisses.

"Ah! most merciful Virgin!" he murmured, "it is her heart-broken mother restored to my arms!"

Holding her in his arms as if she were a baby, he rocked back and forth, not seeking to restore her to consciousness, but calling her by every term of endearment his father's tongue could fashion.

The Marshal of Two Bits was far more interested in the fate of the youth whom he supposed to be the famous road-agent leader.

It was enough to be robbed of one victim. He was resolved to string up the other if he could get the rope round his neck before the last breath had left his body.

But it would take the edge off his malignity if the victim were not conscious of his fate. Therefore, his first efforts were devoted to his restoration.

While he was thus employed, Lola's young nature triumphed over the shock of her fall, and she came to of her own accord.

In the first bewildered moments of returning consciousness her parent's tender appeals were lost on her.

Her roving eye took in the circle of excited and curious faces that bent over her, and her ear, regaining its sensitiveness, carried to her intelligence the harsh voice of the marshal crying angrily:

"Stand back! Do you want the boy to die on our hands? You can't smother him an' have the pleasure of stranglin' him too, I want ye to know!"

As the men scattered, driven back by the vicious sweep of the marshal's arm, the girl saw the body of her lover stretched limp and senseless on the ground at her side.

With a cry of despair and savage resentment, she tore herself from her father's detaining arms, and cast herself upon the body.

"Away, you fiends!" she shrieked, hysterically. "Do not dare to lay your vile hands upon him! You have killed him! Oh, Holy Mother! where was your pity? Had you forgotten the anguish that rent your heart when men like these made the wounds in the body of your dear Son? Oh, Roy! Roy! Heaven and all the angels have forgotten us! Let me not stay behind you! Speak! You— Oh, you cannot be deaf to me, too!"

And like a broken lily, she bowed her face on his unresponsive one, drenching it with heart-broken tears.

Even the icy-hearted marshal was awed by her despair. He turned pale and shrunk back, not daring to touch her.

The men turned away. None of them had ever witnessed grief like this before. The coarse-grained women whom they had seen in distress were as unlike Lola as cabbages are unlike roses.

Her father bowed his face in his hands. He, who had known so well the mother of whom she was a counterpart, realized the blow that had fallen upon her.

She came of a race who loved but once, and then to the death! Nothing that could be proved against her lover would turn her from him. She would follow him to the scaffold, and when his lifeless body was cut down, would take it in her arms and weep her life out with her lips to the bloodless ones that would never again couple her name with words of endearment.

"My child!" pleaded the wretched father, taking her hand, and trying to draw her attention to himself. "My child! Look at me! It is your mother that calls to you!"

Her mother! That talismanic word caught her ear when no other would.

"My mother!" she repeated, lifting her head, and brushing her hand across her forehead, as if to sweep away bewildering fancies. "My mother!"

Her hoarse whisper thrilled the men with superstitious fears.

"You mother through me, to whom she gave you as a pledge of our mutual love. I am your father, my child, who have mourned you as dead for fifteen weary years!"

She turned her head to look at the speaker, not however removing her hand from the body of her lover.

She saw a grief-stricken old man, one gray before his time—silvered with grief.

Never had she seen such tender benignity, as with clasped hands and streaming eyes he appealed to her.

It was impossible to doubt his words. She accepted his claim as implicitly as if it had fallen from the lips of the image of the Blessed Virgin.

"Father!" she cried, extending one hand toward him, while the other still clung to the senseless form of her lover. "Save him!"

The father put his arms about her.

"Do you love me, my child? Do you trust me?" he asked.

"Oh, yes!" she replied. "I know that you are my dear papa. See! I have known you all these years of waiting for you to come some time and claim me."

And with trembling fingers she drew a locket from her bosom, and displayed two miniatures, one of which bore so striking a resemblance to herself as to at once suggest that it was the likeness of her mother. The other was a presentment of Senor Fabiano as he might have appeared when twenty years younger.

"Rafale did not know that I possessed this," she said. "It was given to me by Bettina just before she died. She told me to keep it secret, and that some day it might give me back my dear mamma! That was all she dared to tell me. She was bound by a most terrible oath never to divulge the secret that weighed upon her soul in her last moments."

"But let us not think of the past. See! see!"

And choking for further words, she turned again to Little Oh-my.

"My darling," murmured her father, "let me take you away from this terrible scene. You can do nothing for him now. I know how your heart bleeds; but we must all bow beneath the chastening hand of One who knows what is best for us."

"But it is not so!" she cried with intense passion. "Nothing has been done for him yet! How do you know that he is indeed dead? He is not dead! Oh, God cannot be so cruel as this! I have had him not the circling of one sun yet!"

"Others will look to him," pleaded her father gently.

"Let me see them begin."

"If you'll let me git to him, I reckon I am as anxious to fetch him round as you kin be," said the marshal, with a grim consciousness of the double meaning of his words.

"The marshal!" she gasped, shrinking from him.

"You needn't be skeered," was his assurance. "I ain't after you."

Her father still drew her away.

"Come, my darling! You are safe," he said, soothingly.

She felt vaguely that the false appearances had somehow been cleared up, and the assurance seemed to include her lover. She therefore allowed herself to be drawn from his body.

As his canteen was drawn from under him, the stopper was pulled out, and the milk flowed forth. The eggs too, crushed in his pocket, manifested their presence. These tokens of his last acts of care for her were the occasion of tears.

After a brief examination of the body, the marshal rose with an oath.

"He's as dead as a smelt!" he declared.

"Dead!" repeated Lola.

And escaping from her father's arms, she again knelt beside her lover, lifted his limp hand, and let it fall again.

Then a gasping sigh escaped her, and swaying, she swooned in her father's arms.

He lifted her, and bore her away sadly.

At that instant there was a sharp cry:

"Drop it!"

Then rung forth the spiteful crack of a revolver.

The next instant there ensued a terrific struggle.

All were taken so by surprise that they stood in dumb bewilderment, gazing at the contestants, until the Marshal of Two Bits rose and planted his foot on the throat of fallen George Cameron.

"Boys, is the rope ready?" he asked. "He's one of 'em by his own confession; so I reckon we don't want no palaverin' over him, at any rate."

"An' an infernal traitor!" cried one of the men. "He's so much the worse than the rest."

"An' a coward to boot!" added another. "Ef he was at the outs with his captain—an' only a kid, at that!—why didn't he meet him like a man?"

"He never meant to leave him fur us to string up, an' that's enough fur me!" said the marshal, grimly.

With this unanimity of sentiment the men bestirred themselves getting the rope in readiness.

While a noose was being tied in one end, the other was thrown over a convenient limb.

George Cameron saw that he was caught in

his own trap. Nothing that he could say would better his case any. Even if he could prove that he was not a road-agent, they would hang him as a murderer. He therefore observed grim silence, meeting his fate with that stoical courage in which men used to the wild life of the border pride themselves.

When it was known that Little Oh-my was not Don Carlos, and the game Cameron had played, which would have brought him to an ignominious death but for his reckless act of blind jealousy, was thus revealed, it would make such a story as would be repeated about camp-fires and in bar-rooms. Then the narrators would say of the plotter:

"He died with his boots on!"

For such evil fame as this, men have died with a fortitude that would become heroes.

"Gentlemen," he said, when the brutal marshal had taken his foot from his throat, so as not to suffocate him, "you needn't treat me like a dog. Let me up and we can proceed with this thing decently."

"By thunder! that ain't much," declared one of the men, who knew pluck when he saw it.

"Let him up."

He was lifted to his feet and stood quietly.

The noose was then adjusted to his neck, and the marshal then asked:

"Have you anything to say before we swing you off? Ef so, spit her out, an' lively!"

"Only this," said Cameron, coolly: "may you escape the bullets that are hunting you, and live to taste the rope that you are so fond of giving to other men!"

"Thank you!" said the marshal, as coolly.

"Ef I live until the man is born that is to hang me, you'll never see me whar you're goin'!"

"Walk away, boys!"

They "walked away," and the body they left dangling was what called forth the exclamation of satisfaction from Old '49, when an hour later he came upon the scene with the chaplain of Fort Monico.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE REWARD OF VILLAINY.

SENOR FABRIANO had borne away his daughter in his arms.

Caught in his own trap, George Cameron was dangling between heaven and earth.

Having satisfied himself that his last victim was indeed dead, the Marshal of Two Bits turned to where the boys were making preparations to bury the inanimate body of Little Oh-my.

"Gents," he said, "what air ye up to?"

"We're proposin' to plant him in Christian style," answered one of the men.

"How would it do to wait until he's dead?" asked the marshal, coolly.

"I allow he won't be no deader than he is now."

"That's all you happen to know about it."

"What do you mean?"

"That he's playin' possum."

The men looked in astonishment from the marshal to the motionless body.

Jake Probst bent over Little Oh-my, loosened his shirt at the throat, and put his own canteen to his lips.

"You can't expect much of a man that carries milk in his canteen," he said, with a coarse laugh. "He's the very deuce of a road agent, he is! He ought to hang fur bringin' disgrace on the fraternity!"

Little Oh-my drew in a deep inhalation, exhaled it with a painful sigh, and then writhed feebly.

"You see," said the marshal, "a man will almost always come back to earth for his nips. I reckon they see a prospect o' gittin' dry over on t'other side. In a minute he'll be in shape so'st we kin finish him off in fine style with a taste o' hemp. Ye see, boys, I knowed he wa'n't a goner the minute I put my hands on him."

"Then what did you say so fur?"

"Waal, ye see, I wanted an excuse fur swingin' yon galoot. He thought he'd tied our hands with a pretty kink. But he didn't know Jake Probst! In the States they let all the sneaks go, by turnin' State's evidence; but at Two Bits they could l'arn a trick worth two o' that. All's grist that comes to my mill, I want ye to understand!"

"Waal, you'll slip up on this hyar sack, ur I lose my guess!"

And the speaker drew his revolver with a look of determination that showed that he was not a man to be easily backed down.

"What do you mean?" asked the marshal, when he so far recovered from his astonishment as to fetch breath.

"I mean that you ain't a-goin' to break that

thar leetle gal's heart, Don Carlos ur no Don Carlos. As long as the boy kin kick she's goin' to have what's left of him, ye understand!"

The idea caught the chivalric spirit of the boys; and, swayed by a common sentiment, they burst into a yell of approval.

Jake Probst stood up and looked them over. Every man of them was against him except Micky McClosky. Even he stood with a piteous look of appeal on his freckled mug.

"Av yez could let up an um the l'aste taste in the worruld, mair-shal!" he said.

Without a word the enraged guardian of the law strode to his horse, mounted, and rode away.

"It's easier breathing hyar, now, boys," said the man who had so ably championed the cause of Little Oh-my in his extremity.

The others showed signs of relief, though they did not express it in words. Perhaps the time would come when Two Bits would throw off the yoke of its tyrannical marshal.

A litter was made of a blanket fastened between two saplings, the whole being slung between two horses placed tandem.

In it Little Oh-my was borne slowly toward Two Bits.

When Lola recovered consciousness, she insisted on being taken back to her lover.

Returning, they passed the sullen marshal, who favored them with only a scowl of relentless malignity, and so made their way back to the litter.

By this time Little Oh-my was fully conscious, and the meeting between him and his faithful sweetheart was the theme of many an enthusiastic delineation thereafter.

She insisted on walking beside the litter and holding his hand all the way back to camp. The way was neither too rough nor too long for her strength, ever renewed from the wellspring of her abounding love.

"I shall have all our lives long to rest in, my darling!" she cooed into his delighted ear.

It only needed that they should be overtaken by Old '49, to make their joy complete; and he, having left the chaplain to find his way back to Fort Monico as best he might, had pressed hotly on the trail over which he supposed they were bearing his boy to an ignominious death.

When he came up with them, the old fellow could find no words to express his satisfaction with the turn matters had taken; for a brief examination revealed that his favorite had received what he called only a scratch, though, sooth to say, it was a bullet lodged in the shoulder.

"Why," cried Old '49, boisterously, "he fainted with the pain o' ketchin' his gal! I wouldn't 'a' b'lieved he was that kind, though!" he added, with a sly wink.

So on to Two Bits, where a tragic scene awaited them.

They found the place in such wild excitement as had never prevailed there before.

During the absence of the denizens of the place, the male portion of whom, it will be remembered, had almost to a man gone out with Senor Fabiano to the rescue of his daughter, the camp had been invaded by a party of mounted men, who had proceeded to "paint it fire-red," the few men who were left "hunting their holes" with as little noise as possible, while the terrified women ran screaming into the woods.

Before the Double-shuffle saloon stood a large red cedar, the limbs of which were now adorned with two dangling bodies.

To the bole of the tree was nailed a placard, which read:

"Compliments of Don Carlos to the Marshal of Two Bits! I take pleasure in satisfying your curiosity as to the traitors who so mysteriously placed in your hands warning of my presence in your camp. After employing me to get the girl, Lola Milado, and her companion Rafale, out of the way in a manner which would bear the inspection of the law, it seems to have been their purpose to cover up their tracks by putting my neck into a halter. Believing that one good turn deserves another, I leave them here as proof that I always pay my debts, whether to friends or foes!"

The bodies were those of Rube Martin and Senor Valanquez.

The fact was that Rube, without knowing who Don Carlos was, but, through his association with his Mexican employer, apprised of his intended visit to Two Bits on that particular night, had sought to betray him into the hands of the enterprising marshal, in return for having once been robbed by him. Detecting his treachery, Don Carlos had put on it an interpretation which involved Senor Valanquez; and without being guilty in this particular case,

that villain had reaped the reward for his plots against the life of our heroine.

In him Senor Fabriano recognized a half-brother who, to gain possession of the estate left by their father, had robbed him of home and family, sending him a fifteen years' exile in a Spanish prison, where unsuccessful revolutionists rotted in dungeons whose reeking walls the glad sunlight never fell upon. His wife had died of a broken heart. His child had been given over to wretches who had engaged to put her out of the way of ever knowing anything of her despoiled rights.

But Rafaelle Mlado, then a youth in his teens, had conceived the brilliant plot of stealing the child, raising her to womanhood, marrying her, and then coming forward with his claims as her husband.

After fifteen years the villainous uncle had discovered the danger that threatened his peaceful possession of the ill-gotten estate, and had resolved to complete his title, this time assuring himself by being on the spot where he could see with his own eyes that the counter claimant was silenced forever.

In official reports his brother had been among those who were shot one morning. But a slip of the pen may make all the difference between a dead man and a living; so one day a counter revolution turned out upon the world a man whose very name was unknown to his jailers of fifteen years; and Senor Fabriano returned to his cisatlantic home, to learn that the traitor who had betrayed him to the Spanish authorities had completed his infamy by despoiling the home he had so long despaired of ever seeing more.

But all was now ended in a happiness that would go far toward compensating his long years of solitary despair. He had his child, even more beautiful than his lost wife, to drop with him tears of tender memory on the grave which covered the wreck of her happiness. And in Little Oh-my he gained a noble son, whose manly promise he could watch with pride.

In sunny Mexico our hero and his child-wife set up what Old '49 called a baby play-house.

In due time it was gladdened and brightened with the advent of black-eyed little Americo-Mexicans; and it goes without telling that Old '49 never tired of trotting them on his foot until they had grown large enough to be amused by his graphic story of their parents' courtship.

Whether the Marshal of Two Bits ever caught Don Carlos is nowhere as yet recorded in history.

THE END.

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